

STUDENT ASSETS AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS AS THEY AFFECT
STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This action research project examines practices that have an effect on student engagement. The research examines high behavioral and academic expectations as well as utilizing students' assets and their effects on engagement. The primary focus is on engagement: how do these practices encourage student engagement. Using qualitative analysis methods, I found that the three aforementioned practices contributed to student engagement. Three primary findings emerged from data analysis: the importance of relationships in the classroom, the necessity of the teacher as authority, and valuation of students' assets.

Keywords: engagement, academic engagement, behavioral engagement, assets, discussion, teacher-researcher

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CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT FOR STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Context for the Study

My interest in the study of engagement originated in the trends that emerged as I made my observations as a practicum teacher. The classroom I observed is located in an ethnically-diverse, comprehensive high school, Brooke View High School¹. The student body is approximately 50% European American, 10% African American, 10% Asian American, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 15% Latino, and 3% Native American (OSPI, 2013). Overall, 41% of the student population receives nutritional assistance in the form of free or reduced-price meals. The racial/ethnic makeup of Brooke View is more diverse than the state as a whole; however, a smaller percentage of Brooke View students receive free or reduced priced meals than in the state overall. My observations came in both standard and remedially tracked classes. Within these classes, students of color students were overrepresented. Generally, these students demonstrate low levels of engagement on all three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The students in these classes have low submission and completion rates for work, often turning in work late or incomplete. Additionally, these students are frequently tardy to class. My observations indicate that these students do not feel valued in the classroom, nor that the students believe in their own ability to engage in demanding learning experiences.

As an educator, I believe that each of these students has the ability to be successful in school. I believe that these disengaged behaviors may be a reaction to institutional and continual student disempowerment. Marginalized students are not

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

explicitly excluded or disregarded. However, these students are tracked into classrooms which often have lower expectations.

The Current State of Public Education

The environment of education is constantly in flux, with many forces at play. Educators and administrators continually attempt to best serve the needs of American children while politicians intervene with policies to maximize student learning. The current reform movement, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is based on the idea that high academic standards and measurable goals will benefit students. Also, NCLB establishes heavy implications for students, schools, and districts that do not meet the established standards (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 2010). Unfortunately, NCLB disregards the contexts in which the students enter the classroom, setting the exact same expectations for all students without regard for students' home lives, linguistic backgrounds, or socioeconomic status (SES), all of which may contribute to the gap in achievement amongst students.

Implementing standards for student learning and teacher accountability, although well-intentioned, leads to teachers relying on direct instruction and teaching that is directly aligned with the standards, thus limiting curriculum (Cuban, 2013). Through this model of teaching, students are served with a curriculum prescribed by either schools or districts, sometimes both, which effectually disempowers students by disregarding their natural curiosity, turning them into passive receptacles for knowledge (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 2010). The direct instruction pedagogy, or "banking model" (Freire, 2000), leads to students who are disengaged, as their natural talents and interests are disregarded. Thus, student disengagement is a vicious cycle. As the patterns and

trends of disengagement emerge, teachers may only see assets and skills that do not directly contribute to educational goals, classroom, known as the *deficit mindset* (Milner, 2012). For example, a deficit mindset teacher would see students talking in class and see students who are distracting others. Conversely, an asset minded teacher could see those same students talking and see an opportunity to use oral communication skills as a method by which they could teach.

Further, the standards movement can be interpreted as an active measure toward maintaining the status quo and ensuring the socioeconomic growth of a few at the expense of many (Labaree, 2010). The history of public education in the United States provides a framework in which that intent can be better understood. The American public school system was created with the hope of shaping students into model citizens who would eventually contribute to the prosperity of the nation (Tyack, 1974). Given the intersection of demographics and the power structure of the country, the criteria for citizenship was narrow, despite the principles by which the country was founded. That legacy is still present in schools today; the students who are successful are disturbingly homogeneous, in that they are predominantly White and middle class (Labaree, 2010).

Societal trends are present in the classroom, leading the classroom to act as a microcosm of society (Cuban, 2013). Therefore, disengagement has heavy implications. If, as Labaree (2010) argues, the students who are engaged are strikingly homogeneous and predominantly middle class, what does that say about a society that declares itself to be democratic? The students who do not achieve because they feel devalued in the classroom are likely to enter into society with similar sentiments, as the

classroom is the usually the first interaction with national institutions (Lareau, 2011; Labaree, 2010).

Standardized testing has been implemented as a way to measure students' progress toward mastering the established standards, despite research that indicates that this form of measurement is, at best, insufficient (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). These tests are problematic in and of themselves, but that problem will not be discussed within this essay. Research suggests that the implementation of high-stakes tests has led to a shrinking curriculum, a splintering of knowledge, and a teacher-centered classroom (Au, 2007; Cuban, 2013). Each of these facets of the current state of education is problematic. When viewed in the lens of developmental psychology, the potential dangers are illuminated: children and adolescents are naturally inquisitive, searching to construct a reality of their surroundings (Engel, 2005). A shrinking curriculum limits the curiosity that students can express in the classroom, which can lead to alienation as students do not bring their whole selves to the classroom. In secondary school, when students are searching for their adult identities and the space in which they fit into society, this alienation is detrimental, as students may see peers with whom they feel comfortable, regardless of the recklessness of the choices those peers make (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2013). Further, operating on the notion that the classroom is a microcosm of society, by limiting the possibilities in the classroom, educators could limit the possibilities of America as a whole.

Additionally, moving toward a more teacher-centered classroom comes with the cost of moving away from student empowerment. By succumbing to the authority and power of the teacher, students, especially those who are marginalized, receive

messages that they are to be submissive to authority figures. Many of these authority figures represent the dominant culture (Kohl, 1992), the prototypical image of who is an American: White and middle class. This submission can be interpreted as an active maintenance of the status quo, which keeps marginalized populations on the fringe of society, thus reproducing social inequities.

The history of the profession of teaching provides some understanding of the reasons behind teachers' unwillingness to challenge the status quo. The majority of teachers are women from the lower-middle class (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011), who use teaching as a career to achieve some upward social mobility (Graves, 2009). With the sanctions that NCLB imposes when teachers fail to meet standards, teachers are apt to act out of fear, which leads them to take fewer risks professionally (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 2010). When teachers do not take risks professionally, they maintain the status quo by not challenging the preconceived notions with which students enter the classroom. Research has shown that when teachers' practices are submissive or passive, that submission may show up in students (Thein, 2009). Their's case study highlights a student who was unwilling to challenge her deeply-held notions about the world. This complacency in opinions is problematic in an allegedly democratic society, as Americans are showing a disturbing trend to only collaborate with the like-minded (Robertson, 2008).

The deficit mindset leads to the process of social reproduction, in which the current conditions of society are maintained: the rich stay rich, the poor stay poor, and marginalized populations stay marginalized, leaving assimilation as the only means to benefit from the allegedly democratic ideals of American society (Lomawaima, &

McCarty, 2006; Okihiro, 1994). This assimilation includes shedding pieces of one's own cultural identity to fit into society. When students are unwilling to make this sacrifice, they disengage, seeing school as irrelevant or dis-serving (Kohl, 1992).

Social reproduction is not necessarily a problem for those who have benefitted from the current social structures in the United States. However, there is an inherent contradiction in a society that claims to be democratic and inclusive when the reality for a significant portion of the population is that of oppression and relatively fewer opportunities.

Fortunately, there are steps that teachers can take to create a more pluralistic and democratic society. Transformative education is the philosophy that one can be transformed through the process of education (Shor & Freire, 1987). One of the cornerstones of transformative education is courage (Freire, 2000). Courage has transformed the American public education system, as illustrated by the efforts of marginalized populations to improve the impoverished conditions in which they were economically forced to live in (Gonzalez, 2013; Graves, 2009; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Okihiro, 1994). However, courage does not need to be solely manifested on the national scale. Individual courage on the part of the teacher can effectively change the conditions of the students with whom he or she works. Teachers, being predominantly White (Feistritzer et al., 2011), must have the courage to challenge their sociocultural lenses to see the way that the society, in which they have been successful themselves, oppresses marginalized populations (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Student Engagement

Engagement is a term that is applied to the degree by which students comply with the expectations of school; the converse being disengagement. When a student is engaged, he or she is committed, motivated, involved, and participatory. Students who are engaged learn more and have higher levels of achievement (Guthrie, 2001).

Engagement is generally broken down into three dimensions: *behavioral*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement includes student participation in the classroom as well as in extracurricular activities.

Participation in such activities can foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. Emotional engagement refers to students' dispositional outlooks toward the environment at school, including peers, teachers, and academics; emotional engagement "is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). Cognitive engagement is related to the students' mental investment, including thoughtfulness and the willingness to exert oneself in order to gain comprehension and skill development. When a student is engaged within all three dimensions, academic success is significantly more probable than when students are engaged in fewer dimensions or not at all (Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie, 2001).

There are no hard lines that draw the distinctions between the three dimensions of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Through practices that emphasize emotional engagement, teachers can work toward a society in which democracy and inclusion are reciprocally emphasized (Noddings, 2013). To do so, the world of education must actively move away from strategies that separate students.

Tracking, or the institutional practice of separating students based on their academic levels, students are placed in classrooms based on ability levels. However, there are obvious parallels between the practices of tracking and segregation. Students, especially students of color, are often placed in tracked classrooms due to behavioral struggles in standard classrooms (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Rubin, 2003). Consequently, as both Anagnostopoulos and Rubin argue, in tracked classrooms students often feel disenfranchised within the institution of school and become disengaged.

Tracking is not the only way in which students separate themselves. Students frequently separate themselves based on their self-perceptions, grouping themselves based on academic achievement level (Rubin, 2003). Unfortunately, this separation goes beyond observable differences, such as race or gender (Rubin, 2003). This separation can be dangerous, as adolescents often value peer relationships more so than relationships with authority figures (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2013). This peer pressure could contribute to deepening levels of separation and disengagement within groups of marginalized students. Left unchecked, these dispositions within peer groups could be detrimental to individuals' learning.

Possible Solutions

Students need to be at the center of everything that a teacher does. Teaching to tests or directly to the established standards disempowers students as individuals. Within the context of the secondary classroom, there are strategies that a teacher can implement to help increase engagement. The literature suggests that a developmentally responsive pedagogy, capitalizing on assets, and a highly structured classroom can all lead to higher student engagement. These three strategies help to

meet students at their own level, both academically and developmentally, leading to higher achievement and learning.

A Developmentally Responsive Classroom

Students are aware of their perceived value in the classroom (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). When students feel that they are not valued by the teacher, they are more likely to disengage, which can lead to lower academic performance or leaving school entirely (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). However, in the era of high-stakes testing, in which the teacher feels pressured to cover material and carries that pedagogy into curriculum, disengagement is dangerous.

To counter this, teachers can build support for student autonomy into the curriculum. Autonomy-supportive practices are those that encourage students to make their own decisions, such as allowing self-chosen texts, student contributions to learning tasks, or student contributions to assessment techniques (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). This support for autonomy has been shown to increase both behavioral and emotional engagement (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). There are a number of reasons for this increase. The first is that students are empowered by choice, which implies that they are respected enough by the teacher to be trusted to make wise decisions. Another contribution to the increase in engagement is the intrinsic reward associated with personalized, interest-based learning (Zull, 2002). A third reason is that an autonomy-supportive classroom is responsive to adolescents' developmental stage. Adolescence is a stage in which one develops an adult identity (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2013). By encouraging student decision-making, teachers can be responsive to the developmental needs of their students, allowing students the space to make decisions to help develop

their individual identities as well as supporting them by believing in their ability to make those decisions.

Autonomy is an important feeling for an adolescent to have, but autonomy must be in balance with structure. When that balance is achieved, greater learning occurs. Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) studied autonomy support in relation to structure within nine public high schools across the Midwest, observing a total of 2,523 students in 113 core academic classes. These classes were spread between the ninth and eleventh grades. The teachers had an average of approximately 13 years' teaching experience and an average class size of 19 students. The students observed were 47% European American, 45% African American, 6% Hispanic, and 2% Asian American. The researchers gained permission from both the principal of the school as well as the classroom teacher before any observations occurred. The observations were completed by graduate students who had been trained to be silent observers, noting teachers' style in relation to the established behavioral and academic guidelines of the classroom. Researchers also surveyed the students to determine their "self-reported" levels of engagement (p. 591).

Jang et al.'s (2010) research was intended to examine the relationship between autonomy support and structure. The research suggests that autonomy support and structure worked together in a complementary manner. When high levels of both autonomy support and structure were present, engagement was higher than in classrooms that emphasized one over the other. Specifically, differences among teachers' specific teaching styles "accounted for 93% of the total variance in students' collective behavioral engagement" (594).

Jang et al. (2010) found two primary characteristics of teachers who had higher engagement. First, when teachers fostered learning utilizing students' individual learning styles and interest, the observed and self-reported engagement significantly increased. Second, clearly communicated expectations and desired educational outcomes resulted in increased student engagement; observed engagement was higher than in students' self-reported engagement.

Jang et al. (2010) provided research that was highly credible. The data was provided by two independent sources. The first, classroom observations, were conducted by trained research assistants, who were blind to the hypotheses and purpose of the study. These research assistants worked in pairs for approximately half of the observations, providing a measure of triangulation of the observations. Additionally, the observers sat "non-intrusively" (592) in the classrooms, in the effort to preserve the authenticity of the classrooms that they were observing. Finally, the classroom teachers consented to allow the researchers into their classrooms, but did not know when the observations would occur; researchers arrived moments before the class period started, which also helped to preserve the natural environment of the classrooms.

Jang et al.'s (2010) research also provided an audit trail to help increase the dependability. This audit trail describes, in detail, the ways in which the data was collected. This audit trail goes as far as to provide the seven-point Likert scales that observers used to analyze both teacher's structure and autonomy support. The most significant threat to the dependability of this research is that observations only occurred in one class period, which threatens the observer's saturation; by only observing one

class period, observers may not have an adequately thorough understanding of the classrooms that they observed. However, the data was collected over 133 classrooms by five observers. That many observations by so few observers suggests that observers were very familiar with the complexities of the intersection of engagement and structure.

Capitalizing on Assets

Every student in the classroom has assets of some sort. Some students are better at oral communication, whereas others are better at written communication. Some students are more resilient than others. One asset that can be utilized to increase engagement is emotional responses. By utilizing and developing emotional responses to curriculum material, teachers can capitalize on the emotional assets that students already possess. Additionally, by capitalizing on this asset, teachers can help adolescents navigate the vast array of emotions that are felt at this stage of development (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2013). For example, research shows that students' empathetic responses can be built upon and developed as a way to bridge the barriers that students erect among themselves on various levels, whether personally, ethnically, or culturally (Louie, 2005). By using and developing emotional responses to curriculum material, such as empathy, a teacher can move toward a classroom that validates students' experience, thus empowering them. In the instance of utilizing empathetic responses to curriculum material, the students transform from a liability in the classroom to an asset, as the preexisting skills are not only utilized but also serve as the catalyst for learning (Louie, 2005). This *asset mindset* (Milner, 2012) has far-reaching implications for students on a psychological level. When teachers view students as an

asset in the classroom, students are more likely to feel as if they belong, which then leads to engagement on a deeper level (Conchas, 2001; Louie, 2005).

When a teacher sees students as providing educational assets, opportunities for engagement increase. The assets that students bring into the classroom vary greatly, but they can be employed to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging within the classroom. One strategy to utilize student assets is adopting the practice of culturally relevant teaching, in which the teacher positions him/herself within the cultural community and adjusts his/her pedagogy accordingly (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Brooks (2006) and Lee (1995) demonstrated the effectiveness of this strategy in increasing the emotional engagement of African American students. Both studies used prominent African American authors as the literature for analysis and required African American students to utilize their *linguistic capital* (Yosso, 2005) to gain a deeper perspective of the text. African American students initially recoiled, as they were unaccustomed to reading multicultural literature in school or utilizing their linguistic capital, but once over the initial shock, behavioral and emotional engagement both drastically increased (Brooks, 2006). When utilizing assets such as linguistic capital, the brain goes through the process of neural reinforcement, as neuronal pathways become stronger and are able to fire more frequently (Zull, 2002). When building on and deepening already held understanding, the brain works faster and more efficiently.

One strategy that can be employed to utilize students' prior experiences is that of *aesthetic reading* (Rosenblatt, 1982). Aesthetic reading is an approach in which the readers are attuned to their emotional reactions to the text. For example, an aesthetic reader can experience the hopelessness and challenges of living through the Great

Depression by reading *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. Aesthetic reading can be used as a vehicle to engage readers in a dialogue with the text (Tovani, 2000). On a surface level, this strategy may lead to temporary or superficial engagement. However, over time, I believe that this strategy could serve as a way for students to engage with a text on a deeper level and serve as a vehicle for students to learn the technical facets of English language arts, for example, examining fine writing techniques that a writer has used that has created the aesthetic response. Even further, aesthetic reading can be used in combination with adolescent's developmental stage. Teachers can help students develop their individual identities by encouraging the exploration of the various facets of humanity that are explored in literature.

Further, when students are called on to utilize assets, such as resilience in the Steinbeck example above, they are not seen as a deficit in the classroom, but rather as an asset (Knesting, 2008), which may lead to a number of positive results, including increased engagement. Classroom discussions often lead to an increase in engagement in multiple dimensions. Classroom discussions run by masterful teachers are inherently democratic, as every student has the equal opportunity to participate and contribute. One step toward effective discussions is to base them on authentic questioning (Adler & Rougle, 2005; Burke, 2012). Authentic questions are those for which the teacher does not already have an answer; answers rather emerge from genuine inquiry (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, & Caughlan, 2013). Research has shown that moving toward a curriculum based on authenticity could increase behavioral engagement because the implication is that the students have the skills and knowledge necessary to answer the questions (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Adler and Rougle (2005) argue that students are more engaged when given authentic tasks. Authentic tasks are those that are more cognitively challenging. Authentic tasks in the English language arts classroom may include classroom discussions or challenging essay writing. These learning tasks are authentic because they do not simply rely on rote memorization and recall, but also include cognitive challenge. In traditional classroom discussions, teachers frequently ask questions to which they know the answers (Adler & Rougle, 2005). However, when teachers ask authentic questions, those which are open-ended and require students to think instead of recite, engagement increases, likely because the students are actually being challenged and are perceived to be intellectually capable of answering the questions.

A discussion-based classroom has a variety of benefits beyond a democratic classroom. First, students socially construct knowledge, based on Lev Vygotsky's theory of learning (Miller, 2010). This social learning may also foster relationship building in the classroom (Burke, 2013). Assuming that these relationships are positive, they could have a positive impact on students. Research shows that positive peer norms can increase engagement and student achievement (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). Socially constructing knowledge and building positive relationships among students may lead to an increase of engagement, given that students feel valued in the classroom by both the teacher and their peers.

Structural Solutions

The structure of a classroom can also help to contribute to a more engaging environment. Research indicates that a highly structured classroom can increase engagement (Adkins-Coleman, 2010; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). A highly structured

classroom is one in which expectations, both behavioral and academic, are clearly communicated to students. These expectations act as a structural reminder that the teacher believes in student ability to meet expectations and thus believes in their abilities overall (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Tyler & Boelter's (2008) quantitative research shows that high behavioral and academic expectations lead to a statistically significant increase in engagement. Research shows that teachers and administrators often hold lower expectations, both behavioral and academic, for students of color, especially males (Ryan, 2001). These low expectations are often the result of deficit mindsets. Conversely, studies show that when expectations are not strictly enforced, engagement increases because students may feel as if the teacher is more compassionate (Cushman, 2005). This contradiction could be better understood with the adage, "pick your battles." Cushman's (2005) research qualifies high expectations, demonstrating to students that classroom learning is more important than other aims in school.

Research has shown that high behavioral expectations may lead to an increased engagement in the classroom. Adkins-Coleman's (2010) research sought to give pre-service teachers an idea of what engagement looks like in the urban classroom, researching the "beliefs and practices" (42) of teachers who had successfully engaged African American students in learning. Adkins-Coleman gathered data by observing classes directly, interviewing teachers and students, and examining assignments that participating teachers assigned. The researcher asked students to identify effective teachers. After the list was generated by students, it was cross-referenced with another list that was created by principals, based on English teachers who had "facilitated

achievement” (42) with African American students. The two teachers with the highest percentage of student nominations and mention from principals were chosen to participate in the study.

The research featured two African American women who had 8 and 19 years’ experience, respectively. Both teachers had been teaching at their schools for at least eight years. The schools were both in the same district outside of a major urban city. These schools were described as the most challenging high schools in the district, with 45% of students receiving free or reduced priced meals and only 40% of the student population proficient in state reading standards. Additionally, the student population of each school was over 95% African American.

The research found that both teachers worked to build strong relationships and foster mutual respect between themselves and the students as well as among the students themselves. The teachers both built empathy through their words and actions, such as allowing a small amount of backtalk from the students, seeing the behavior as individual students’ attempts to save face, rather than as outright disrespect. Additionally, the teachers maintained high behavioral expectations by being strict, but with a purpose, as they knew that success in school is a predictor of success later in life. The teachers were strict but fair and their behavioral expectations were a sign of care. Additionally, these high expectations were matched by the teachers’ “unlimited support” (p. 51), doing anything that was asked of them to assist students. Adkins-Coleman also found evidence that negative student behaviors appeared to stem from students’ disbelief in their own ability to succeed.

One weakness of Adkins-Coleman's (2010) research is its dependability. Both of the focal teachers self-selected the classrooms in which observations would occur, choosing their highest-level classes, one teacher chose her honors class and the other her Advanced Placement. Research shows that students in high-level classes or those who are in the upper grades at a school engage on a higher level those who are in remedial classes or are in lower grades within the school (Archambault et al., 2009). The teachers could have self-selected classes in which students were most likely to respond to behavioral redirection.

The transferability of Adkins-Coleman's (2010) research could be called into question. The teachers whom were featured both grew up in the area of the schools in which they taught, which makes the present research highly contextual. The study presented by Adkins-Coleman (2010), can provide some strategies which could be implemented in an attempt to increase engagement.

Another structural decision that can lead to higher engagement is placing the emphasis on learning rather than grades (Adkins-Coleman, 2010; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Research shows that when teachers place the emphasis on the child, in terms of learning, emotional engagement increases significantly (Adkins-Coleman, 2010; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The emphasis on learning may show the student that the teacher is concerned about the whole student's well-being and has a genuine interest for the way that students will enter into society as adults. Additionally, by emphasizing learning rather than grades, students may learn to approach schooling with the *mindset of growth*, in which the goal is learning, rather than mastering a task or looking smart (Dweck, 2000). These learners approach challenges with an intrinsic motivation,

challenging themselves and trying to learn from their mistakes. Implementing the mindset of growth may be key in a classroom, as it emphasizes what one is able to do and how one can learn from shortcomings.

Research Questions

Research Goals

I will implement classroom practices that have been shown to increase student engagement. I believe that capitalizing on assets and maintaining high expectations, both behaviorally and academically, can lead to an increase in student engagement. I aim to increase students' emotional engagement in the classroom by empowering their aesthetic reading of texts (Rosenblatt, 1982). Too often students, especially marginalized students, are accustomed to being outside their teachers' notions of who is valued in the class, contributing to their academic disengagement. Valuing students' aesthetic responses to reading may lead to a sense of empowerment in the classroom, which should then lead to increased emotional engagement.

I hope to create a classroom environment in which the expectations are high, both behaviorally and academically. Behavioral expectations will include a high demand for mutual respect amongst students, high expectations for the submission rate of work, and compliance to classroom rules. Academic expectations will include high-quality work and preparation in addition to a classroom emphasis on learning rather than grades. I believe that these expectations themselves will create in the students a sense of belief that they are capable of meeting the aforementioned expectations, something to which marginalized students may be unaccustomed.

I believe that these two strategies may increase engagement by validating the student experience and by being responsive to students' developmental state, specifically by giving students autonomy by providing choices with regard to coursework. One example of autonomy in coursework is providing choice in writing prompts. Additionally, utilizing students' assets could foster an easier transition between students' personal and academic lives, as students can bring their whole selves into the classroom. For example, I believe that many students will enter the class with strong oral communication skills. To capitalize on this asset, I will include discussion-based learning. I believe that the duty of teachers is to serve their students to the best of their abilities. Another asset that students will likely have is resilience. Brooke View High School is in a working class neighborhood, leading me to believe that many students will understand the intricacies associated with financial insecurity, and thus be more resilient.

Research Questions

Given the current state of the classroom and the national environment of education, I hope to increase engagement in my classroom. Thus, my research questions are as follows:

1. Does utilizing students' assets affect engagement?
2. Do high behavioral and academic expectations affect engagement?

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Participants and Setting

The classroom in which this research has been conducted is located in an ethnically-diverse, comprehensive high school located in a suburban community. Brooke View High School served 1,048 students at the end of the 2013 school year (OSPI, 2013). The student body is approximately 50% Caucasian, 10% African American, 10% Asian American, 14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 15% Latino, and 3% Native American (OSPI, 2013). Approximately 41% of the student population receives nutritional assistance in the form of free or reduced price meals. The overall school High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE) scores were close to the state averages; BVHS scored 82.2% proficient in reading and 83% in writing, compared to the statewide averages of 83.6% and 85%, respectively.

The classroom is a standard-tracked classroom (the other option within the school being honors). This course option creates an interesting dynamic within the standard-tracked classroom in which the research was conducted. Compared to the honors or advanced placement classes, students of color were over-represented within the standard-tracked classroom. Additionally, these standard-tracked classes enroll more students than do honors or advanced placement.

The physical environment of the classroom could also have an effect on students' levels of engagement. The classroom used to be used as a science lab. Therefore, the classroom has countertops around the perimeter with sinks and power outlets. Students frequently used the power outlets to charge their telephones and other electronic devices during class. These devices had been a major source of

disengagement and distraction for students in the past. Also, given that the classroom was designed for science instruction, the floor is tiled linoleum rather than carpet. This factor made the classroom louder than others, which sometimes made it difficult for students to hear one another clearly. Additionally, students sit in rows comprising four tables of two students per table, all facing the front of the classroom. This arrangement impedes engagement, as students are not environmentally encouraged to make eye contact with their peers, which may lead to students to disregard their peers.

The two classes in which the research was conducted are titled English 1 & 2, an English course required for ninth-grade students. The classes had one teacher, myself, who was also supervised by a mentor teacher. The mentor teacher's role was primarily supervisory, in that he was there to support myself, the student teacher. The two classes comprised of 32 students. Class A has 10 girls and 22 boys, whereas class B has 12 girls and 20 boys. The racial/ethnic demographic of the two classes combined are 46% White, 13% African American, 10% Asian American, 10% Pacific Islander, 19% Latino, and 2% Native American. The classes were held back to back, in fourth and fifth periods.

The curriculum included one novel, one short story, and one work of literary nonfiction. The primary focus of the curriculum was literacy skills, specifically improving reading and writing. This focus was important for the students and the school as a whole, given that the Washington State HSPE occurs in students' second year in high school. Students completed a baseline writing assessment within the first two weeks of the school year to determine their proficiency in writing. Also, students composed a letter to the teacher in the effort to build a working relationship. This letter also served

as a formative assessment of students' skill levels from which I could scaffold my instruction.

Actions Implemented

The first action that was implemented involved utilizing student background knowledge and assets in the classroom. Meaningful learning occurs best when new knowledge has something that it can anchor itself to within the mind (Zull, 2002). In my classroom, I aimed to increase students' awareness of the relationship between their background knowledge and the new knowledge that was being taught in the classroom. A possible source of disengagement could be a sense of distance between students' personal lives and the world of academia. To answer the first research question, I employed a strategy that I called informal writing, in which students reflected on their previous experiences, both personal and academic, in connection with academic work. For example, when students began a unit about *Of Mice and Men*, they completed informal writing assignments about the limits of friendship, as that is one of the main themes of the work.

The second action that was implemented was to utilize classroom discussions as a source of creating understanding. Students entered the classroom with varying abilities of literary analysis. One of the major advantages of classroom discussions is that students are able to socially construct knowledge. This action is not entirely separate from the prior action, as it uses the students' assets. Students of this age are in a developmental stage in which their relationships to peers are vital, which leads to a lot of talking among students (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2013). In order to utilize this asset, student comprehension was constructed socially, through discussion.

These discussions also included many authentic questions on the part of the teacher. Authentic questions are those that are grounded in genuine inquiry (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, & Caughlan, 2013). For example, from the unit in which *Of Mice and Men* was the focal text, an authentic question was “Does anyone have a friend like Lennie, someone whom they would do anything for?” This question helped to foster empathy in the students by paralleling the experience of the characters. These questions serve two purposes. First, students are empowered to express themselves authentically, as the teacher does not know the answer; if the discussion is to continue, students must express their understandings. Secondly, authentic questioning can help to build relationships among peers because it helps to create an environment in which students get to know each other better (Burke, 2013). Both of these purposes supported cognitive engagement, as students worked to answer challenging questions.

As part of classroom discussions, high behavioral expectations were implemented. The purpose behind these expectations was to create a classroom that was a safe space in which students felt comfortable to express their understandings, even if those understandings were not fully processed. Behavioral expectations included demonstrating respect for peers by listening when they spoke, looking at whoever was talking, and having only one person speaking at a time. These expectations were taught from the beginning of the school year. (Although it would be ideal to have students co-construct a list of behavioral expectations, that was not a realistic option given my time constraints.) The expectations were taught through direct instruction and revisited throughout the research and student teaching period when necessary; four times over the ten week quarter.

Finally, these discussions, alongside the other coursework students were expected to complete, were created with the intention that they would be authentic, in that they were rooted in genuine inquiry. I predetermined questions that I would ask as a framework for large-group discussions, but these questions were by no means limiting; as new questions arose during discussions, they were presented to the class, with the explicit explanation that they had not been created before the class, but during. Authenticity in the classroom empowers students by implying the teacher's belief in the students' ability to complete the work.

Another strategy to create authenticity in student work was to foster genuine inquiry. Students were given opportunities to answer self-generated questions based in the texts they read as a class. Ideally, these questions would originate from self-selected texts, but district policy required the texts of the class to be selected by the classroom teacher. The authenticity came from the questions that students self-created. These questions were explored in classroom discussions. This practice helped students to see their peers as resources, an idea that contributed to engagement, both by the students asking the questions and the students answering the questions. By creating authenticity within the classroom, I aimed at further answering the first research question. Authentic questioning is a pedagogical decision that cannot exist in a vacuum; there must be students to explore the question. The exploration of a given essential question puts the responsibility of answering it on the students, for which they must utilize their background knowledge and experience, as authentic questions are grounded in reality.

Finally, I worked to establish strong relationships with all of the students in the class. At the outset of the class, I introduced myself to students with a letter and encouraged them to write a letter in return. In this letter, I provided some background about myself, including my professional and personal experiences. Additionally, I explained my philosophy of teaching in student friendly language in an effort to get students to understand that I am an advocate for them. In addition to the letter, I created and administered a survey to get to know students. Finally, I made myself available in the school. I was in my classroom with the door open every day during lunch in addition to my planning period and after school. I believed that these relationship building strategies would be key to holding students to high expectations, in that they would know that I firmly believed in their ability to engage in the classwork.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative action research project was conducted by myself, the teacher-researcher. Data was collected over the course of a ten-week period in which I was the student teacher for both classes. Data collection began on the first day of school and continued throughout the entirety of the ten-week period.

Teaching two classes allowed me to refine my teaching practice faster than just teaching one. Additionally, I was able to make minor adjustments to my practice based on feedback from one class and apply changes to the following class, even though both classes were considered a single dataset. Data was collected from student interviews, surveys, and video recordings. These three sources of data were used to triangulate the data and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2010).

Student Interviews

Student interviews were conducted twice throughout the research period. Interviews were five and ten minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. Interviewees were volunteers and interviews were conducted during a study-hall period, in which students were excused to participate in the research. Three interviewees were selected, based on observed engagement in the first two weeks of class. Although I asked a fourth student to participate, he declined. Given the time limitations, only one student could be interviewed during the study-hall period each day. Thus, interviews were conducted in weeks three and eight. These interviews probed at students' perceptions of engagement, including their sense of inclusion in the classroom and ability to complete the work (See Appendices 1 and 2, respectively). Questions included "How valued do you feel in the classroom?" and "How are you getting along with the other students?" All student interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow a deeper analysis of the data. Data was then coded following an open coding process (Mertens, 2010) to allow for the presence of trends to emerge. Memos were made indicating interesting data. These memos were then compiled to see how each could be categorized. Categories that emerged were students' sense of inclusion, perceived value among peers, perceived value to the teacher, and willingness to contribute. Interview data was compared to other data sources to increase credibility, specifically to my teacher research journal (Mertens, 2010). Also, interviews allowed a space in which students could reflect on their engagement in the classroom and identify strategies that could help increase their engagement.

Surveys

Two surveys were administered throughout the data collection period. These surveys were administered to the whole class in weeks two and ten. Surveys were anonymous, and any survey with a name was disposed of. In total, I received 110 surveys. The surveys were comprised of seven and six open-ended questions, respectively. I chose to use open-ended questions to encourage students to write as much or as little as they felt to answer each question (Read & Fine, 2005). Surveys were worded in conversational English, in an effort to help reduce language barriers. Additionally, the surveys were peer reviewed before being administered to help maintain the clarity of the questions.

The surveys were coded following an open coding process (Mertens, 2010), in which trends in the data developed. I made memos both on the physical surveys as well as on a separate document to develop the coding of the data. The memos were compiled to determine the categories, which were then cross-referenced with the categories of other data sources to help increase credibility (Mertens, 2010). Also, survey data was compared with other data sources to help triangulate data (Mertens, 2010).

Video Recordings

I also video recorded my classroom on days in which a whole-class discussion was planned. Students submitted video-recording permission slips, as per district policy, within the first week of the class. I reflected on the video recordings, with parts transcribed. Video recordings also provided a more objective view of the classroom, a step toward removing my bias as a researcher (Mertens, 2010). I could observe

students who were trying to be invisible within the classroom as well as students who were actively disengaged.

The transcription process for video recordings allowed for a deeper level of analysis. Transcriptions were then open coded by reexamining the transcripts and memoing data that seemed particularly interesting. Memos were then categorized. Categories that emerged included: responses to building on peers' ideas, personal experience contributions, and text-based evidence as support to peers' ideas. These categories were then compared to other sources in the effort to triangulate data and increase the credibility of my research (Mertens, 2010). Also, the comparison amongst the codes of data sources adds to the internal validity of my research (Mertens, 2010).

Limitations

Increasing engagement can be a career-long undertaking for educators. There are many factors in place, some of which may be invisible. Although I aimed to increase engagement by utilizing assets and maintaining high behavioral and academic expectations, there were likely other factors at play. The credibility of my data and findings could have been challenged. The relationships I established between myself and individual students could have convoluted the data. Additional factors that could have diluted or otherwise challenged the credibility or dependability of the data are, but not limited to, my bias as a teacher-researcher or the level of difficulty in the work that the students completed. Relationships were one of my top priorities when the school year began. I used surveys and personal communication to get to know my students as fast as possible. I also made myself available during lunch and Core/Flex for students to talk about the class, their work, or personal matters, an asset that numerous students

utilized. These relationships, although I believe that they were overall beneficial, may have contributed to a bias in my research because students could have been engaged based on interpersonal relationships with myself as the teacher rather than the strategies listed earlier in this paper. Additionally, I could have been biased in my data analysis, inferring sentiments that were not present in the data based on my fondness of individual students.

To help the credibility of my findings, I collected data from the three aforementioned sources: surveys, interviews, and video recordings. Although surveys were submitted anonymously, I did recognize some handwriting, which could have contributed to inferences. It was impossible to make either the videos or the interviews anonymous, but when transcribing and analyzing the data, I tried to keep an open mind and let the data speak for itself, borrowing from grounded theory (Mertens, 2010). The borrowing from grounded theory may also help to contribute to the conformability of my study, as I tried to minimize my judgment and researcher lens when analyzing data. I used each of the three data sources to triangulate my themes and findings in an effort to increase credibility. Additionally, my research methods and findings were examined by independent reviewers, some of whom were familiar with my research and the context wherein it occurred whereas others were unfamiliar with either the context of the study or the research itself, thus increasing the credibility of the research and findings.

A second area of concern is the time involved in the research. I was fortunate enough to spend time in the school approximately a year before the research began as a practicum intern. This allowed me to get a deep understanding of the nuances associated with the school and the classroom in which my study occurred. As a student

teacher, I was responsible for designing the curriculum for the two classes that served as the data collection source, a massive duty in itself as a new teacher. I was also responsible for all the other professional duties that are expected of a teacher, staff meetings, professional development seminars, etc. I was also responsible for weekly reports to my teacher education program that included weekly seminars. Finally, I was responsible for the edTPA, the national certification exam for new teachers, a task that required approximately 60 hours outside of the classroom. All of these responsibilities and expectations could contribute to a disjointed or unfocused research project and thus threaten the dependability of my research. In an attempt to gather data that provides a more complete view of the classroom and the actions implemented, I gathered data from three sources: whole class surveys, individual interviews, and video recordings. The triangulation of data contributes to more dependable findings (Mertens, 2010) as well as filling in gaps that any individual data source could have left. Also, my data, coding, and findings were all examined by independent peers, some of whom were familiar with my research and some of whom were not. Any suggestions that these members made were taken into consideration, and thus increasing the dependability of my research. Finally, as confirmed by the peer reviews, the description of the research location, context, and methods were considered both rich and thick, which could increase the dependability and the transferability.

The student surveys asked open-ended questions, allowing students to interpret the questions independently. Although I had a colleague member-check the surveys, there is the possibility that students did not understand the questions. Also, the open-ended nature of the questions required interpretation during coding and analysis.

Although I had the same colleague member-check my coding and analysis process, my researcher's lens was still present in data analysis, as the researcher is the tool by which findings are constructed, which could be a threat to the dependability of my research and finding (Mertens, 2010).

While analyzing data, I tried to let the data speak for itself. The grounded theory of data analysis encourages researchers to analyze data without preconceived notions or codes (Mertens, 2010). While analyzing surveys, I borrowed principles from grounded theory and created codes for each new response I encountered, creating an average of thirteen unique codes for the first survey and sixteen for the second. Some of these codes were then compared and condensed when they indicated similar student sentiments. I borrowed principles of grounded theory when analyzing data; trying to remove any preconceived notions when analyzing data.

The purpose of this action research project was not to determine causality, but to implement research-based practices into my teaching. As a new teacher, I researched practices that could address areas that could be improved in classrooms that I observed, and attempted to replicate them. One practice that I attempted to replicate was outlined by Adkins-Coleman (2010), maintaining high behavioral expectations. The transferability of this research was a challenge, as the focal teachers shared similarities with the student body. Both teachers were African American in schools that were over 95% African American and had grown up in the communities in which they taught. These factors could have contributed to not only the teacher's effectiveness but also their interactions with the students. Also, these two teachers had significantly more experience than I do; I was in my first experience as the primary teacher. As a student

teacher, I was observed frequently and had a mentor teacher in the room at all times, factors that contributed to my interactions with students, but also likely influenced student's behaviors. Additionally, the teachers in Adkins-Coleman's research self-selected their highest-level classes, whereas I selected the lowest grade-level classes as my data source, which could have effected engagement levels.

Finally, as a researcher, I attempted to be transformative. Working in a high poverty and highly diverse school, I sensed that there were many students who were being underserved by something that is considered a basic right in this country. I sought to implement practices which could lead to these students being better served by increasing their participation and learning in school. Although it would be difficult to track, I believe that my teaching and practices may have had an effect on students and could possibly lead to more success in school and possibly later in life.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overview

This action research project examined the relationships between engagement and the three following aspects: high behavioral expectations, high academic expectations, and use of students' assets. In order to examine these relationships, I implemented the following actions: created a classroom that was developmentally responsive and highly structured as well as one that used of students' assets. I collected data from three sources: surveys, interviews, and video recording. Through data analysis, themes emerged. I found that students value the relationship with the classroom teacher, which can lead to engagement. I also found that students expect a certain amount of authority from the teacher, but that authority cannot be overbearing or too loose. Finally, I found that students' assets were not valued until I, as the teacher, assigned value to them.

Relationships

Findings indicate that building a relationship with students may be the most important factor in increasing engagement. On the first survey, which was administered in the third week of the school year, students responded to an open-ended question that asked, "Who is your favorite teacher? What does that person do to make you like him/her?" Students were provided a blank space in which they could write their response. Responses were coded with an open coding process in which the responses were categorized. Some responses were coded into two categories, when student responses indicated that two different factors contributed to their favorite teacher. Fifty-six total surveys were submitted, with a total of 86 responses to the question above.

When students were asked about their favorite teacher, 48 of 86 responses were categorized either as *nice/kind*, *fun/funny*, or *personal connection*. Responses that were coded as a personal connection indicated that the teacher made an effort to get to know the students or provided support in issues beyond classroom materials. One student response that was coded as a personal connection read, "I've known [my favorite teacher] since 5th grade & became really close to her[.] [S]he would help me in math and [personal] problems. She is really supportive of me and helps me." This response indicated that that the teacher was supportive of the student in matters beyond academics. Another response that indicated the importance of personal connection read, "[Favorite teacher's name,] because he likes baseball and he can be funny." This response was coded as both personal connection and fun/funny, as the response indicates that both elements contribute to the student considering the teacher his favorite.

The importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student was again supported by student responses to another question on the same survey, "Do you think your teachers care about you as a person?" This question followed the same open-ended format. Responses were again coded using an open coding approach, and then categorized. There were a total of 56 responses. I believe that the wording of the question led to more limited responses. Had I included a follow-up to the question, "What makes you think so?" I would have gotten more detailed responses. Overall, the student responses indicated that they believe teachers care about their students. A total of 33 responses indicated that they believe their teachers care, seven of which indicated the personal connection between the teacher and the student as an indicator of the

teacher's compassion. One response that indicated the importance of the personal connection read, "Yes all of my teachers that I had in the past [have] told me that I'm a good person it's just I have to stop giving up on myself." This response was coded as personal connection because the response indicated that the student and the teachers had a relationship beyond the curriculum; this student's response indicated that her teachers cared about the student to help her past a troubling personality characteristic, giving up on herself. Another student response read, "Most of my teach[ers] would like to talk about their & our life individually." This response required some interpretation, but was coded as personal connection because the conversation about personal lives demonstrated the compassion that the student felt.

The trend of personal connections between the teacher and the student brought some questions to the surface. The first question related to adolescents' development: is the personal connection, which so many students expressed as an important teacher characteristic, a response to adolescent development? As adolescents experiment with various identities, is the personal connection with the teacher an important sounding board for feedback based on the identities with which adolescents are experimenting?

Another important question that surfaced based on the initial analysis of the data related to holistic education. Does the perceived importance of a personal connection demonstrate the necessity of holistic education, in which the whole is student is considered, not simply the subject-area parts of the individual student?

In the second data collection survey, students responded to the question, "Do you think that your teachers believe in you? Why or why not?" Aimed at gathering data related to academic engagement, this open ended-question allowed students to express

their own answer. The responses were coded using an open coding process to allow the themes to emerge (Mertens, 2010). I devised 20 codes for student responses, each new or unique response getting its own code. I ended up with 64 data points; some student responses were coded more than once.

Students expressed overall that they felt that their teachers believed in them; 28 of the total 64 responses I considered an explicit *Yes* to the question, whereas only eight were considered a direct or explicit *No* and an additional 13 considered contextual, containing answers that were coded as *Sometimes* or *Some do, some don't*. The diversity of student responses indicated the teacher behaviors that led to their sentiment of belief. The largest group that indicated *Yes* noted the amount of help that teachers provided to students. Eight of the explicit *Yes* responses pointed to teachers helping students as a way that teachers demonstrated their belief in students' ability. Another two responses mentioned the time that teachers spent, although it was not clear whether the students were referring to time directly interacting with students, or taking into account time outside of the school building as well.

Student interviews supported the assertion that the students in my classes felt that I believed in their ability to do the work, a step toward increasing academic engagement. All students whom I interviewed indicated that they felt as that I believed in their ability to do the work. One student said, "it's not just like you expect everybody to understand it, you *make sure* everybody understands it" (emphasis in original). In a different interview, another student cited my explicit telling her that she was capable as evidence of her feeling that she I believed in her ability.

One concerning group of responses indicated that students felt it was the teacher's job to believe in them. Six responses indicated this sentiment. This raises the question about these particular students' mindsets: is it viewed in a positive or negative manner that part of the teacher's job is to believe in the students, a question for further research.

The second survey also included the question: "Do you feel that your classes are appropriately difficult? Why or why not?" This question sought to answer the question about academic engagement: Do high academic expectations increase engagement? Research suggests that students will try harder in classes that they believe to be difficult, but more so when students have a positive and supportive relationship with the classroom teacher (Adkins-Coleman, 2010).

Student responses were coded following the same open-coding process (Mertens, 2010), which allowed themes to emerge. Findings indicated that there is a wide range of feelings about the difficulty of classes. This is to be expected, since this survey was administered ten weeks into students' first year of high school. Overall, 25 of 54 responses indicated that students felt their classes were appropriately difficult, whereas 14 expressed explicitly that classes were not appropriately difficult. Of those 14 responses, six indicated that their classes were too easy, whereas only one indicated explicitly that his/her classes were too hard. One student responded to the question, "Yes, because I am barely passing," citing grades as the measure of difficulty.

The video recordings support the claim of Adkins-Coleman (2010) that high academic expectations can lead to higher engagement. In a video recording from October 10th, students engaged in a prewriting activity. As students began to finish, I

instructed them to complete five more prompts. These additional prompts were not inherently academic, they were predominantly self-assessment and rewording learning targets. Students demonstrated high engagement when I announced that there were five more questions to answer. When I told the students to move on to the additional items, nine of the ten students in the video frame looked up from their papers and looked at me directly, seven of those nine leaning forward. The students' behavior indicated that, when challenged, they engaged at a higher level. This engagement could be based on the relationships that had been established and fostered in the classroom. I had worked to build and foster relationships with students, but also instill in them that I believed in their ability to complete the work, which could help explain engagement in the learning task.

This particular instance raises questions. The students engaged in a document that was titled "Daily Progress Worksheet" that was typed and included lines for students to write their responses. I believe that the document itself could have led students to believe that it was a formal assessment, raising the stakes and the affective filter, which could have led to engagement. Also, this lesson fell on one of the days in which I was documenting my teaching for the edTPA. Earlier in the week, a student had asked about the camera in the classroom, which I had placed in a highly visible place in the room. I explained the stakes involved with the edTPA earlier in the week. Although students did not question the presence of the camera that day, there was a possibility that they remembered the purpose of the camera.

In summary, students value their relationships in the classroom. The particular relationship between the teacher and individual students may contribute to engagement.

This may be because the relationship can help the student to believe in him/herself. This belief could spring from the relationship in that the student may think that if the teacher values him/her as a person, the student will work to make the teacher proud of him/her. Additionally, these relationships may help to increase the academic difficulty in the class, based on that desire to please the teacher. Also, the relationship between individual students and the teacher could foster an understanding that makes asking for help, either during class time or outside of class time easier, when a student would be able to get more individualized instruction.

Authority

Findings from all three data sources indicated that, even as a new teacher, I had an appropriate level of authority in the classroom. The interviews indicated that I was appropriately authoritative in the classroom, two of the three indicating that I allowed students to be themselves by allowing some talking, for example, but still kept students focused on the work. One student, however, indicated that I wasn't authoritative enough, but did not elaborate any further.

In reviewing the video recordings from throughout the ten-week period of my student teaching, I noted some of the various behavioral interventions that I attempted. One strategy was to highlight students who were adhering to behavioral expectations. One way that I highlighted students was anonymously. In a video recording from October 7th at one point I said, "I see a number of students working silently. That is the way that this activity is accomplished." The students responded by decreasing side conversations and getting to work on the activity. This intervention was present in four of the 12 total video recordings and was nearly equally effective each time. Another

behavioral intervention that I utilized was counting the number of students who were adhering to the behavioral expectations. For example, I would say, “I see four students working quietly. Now I see six,” and so on. This intervention was present in five of the videos at various points. This intervention was marginally successful, showing significant change in student behavior in three of the instances and marginal change in the remaining two instances. I believe that this intervention would be more effective if it were utilized only in certain contexts, such as only during silent reading periods.

One instance that demonstrates overexertion of authority appeared in a video from October 13th. The learning activity for the day was small-group discussions in which students were to engage in a seminar discussion, responding to one of three questions; the question that they responded to was self-selected from a list of three that I had created, each one relating to one of the three literary analysis topics that had been discussed throughout the class. I explained that students needed to demonstrate mutual respect for their peers, and then I outlined four behavioral norms for doing so. To demonstrate how serious this mutual respect was, I told students that I would be forced to ask them to leave the class if I observed any violation of mutual respect. Later in the video, when I was outlining the format for the group discussion, many students were engaging in side conversations, I said, “We are not off to a good start demonstrating mutual respect.” By implementing this intervention, students understood the high expectations, both behavioral and academic, to which they were being held. The students responded to this behavioral intervention appropriately, disengaging from side conversations and adjusting body language to demonstrate that they were listening. As an educator who believes in social justice, I do not like to resort to

removing students from the classroom. I did outline my reasoning for responding to adverse behaviors so severely; I believe that it is important for students to learn how to engage in a productive seminar unsupervised, especially within the larger framework of democracy.

Aside from the severity of the consequences for misbehavior, I believe that there is a key element to the effectiveness of this intervention. The behavioral expectations were outlined in a clear way; the students understood how they should have behaved. These behavioral expectations were given a name: mutual respect. When I made my observation about the class's behavior, I made sure to use the same wording. I referred to the students' behavior as a lack of mutual respect, so students understood that my observations were clearly in violation of the norms that were outlined. I believe that this could be a key in understanding classroom authority and holding students to high behavioral expectations. I believe that if students have a strong understanding of the behavioral expectations and accurate terms with which they could label those expectations, redirection and intervention can be more effective. By establishing my authority as firm, but also understanding, I was able to make sure that students were adhering to both academic and behavioral expectations. Additionally, by developing this authoritative persona in the classroom, students believed and listened to me when I assigned value to assets.

Assets

Utilizing students' assets proved to be a larger challenge than I initially thought. Students were not accustomed to viewing their peers as resources; at times, I even sensed a feeling of competition in the class. In order to begin to attune students to

valuing assets, I employed many discussions. Discussions allowed students to learn from their peers through oral communication. Assets were not seen as valuable until I, as the classroom teacher, assigned value to them.

I attempted to utilize students' assets through discussion. I employed large-group discussions through guided reading in which I read the primary text aloud and then posed questions. The questions that I asked students varied in complexity: some were comprehension questions whereas others required deeper interpretation. I considered student responses an asset. To help utilize this asset, I regularly rephrased student responses. In rephrasing responses, I was able to help students to assign value to student responses during discussion. Four weeks into the study, three weeks into highlighting students' assets, one student, whom I perceived to have low status in the classroom, began to share. Shortly after he began, I noticed that there were a number of side conversations occurring. I asked the student to stop reading, and I redirected the class, saying that the class wasn't demonstrating respect for that student. The student began sharing again and the conversations resumed. I then intervened again, saying, "Jeremy is sharing and I want to know what he has to say." Jeremy's peers then demonstrated behaviors that indicated that they valued what he had to share as well. The side conversations ceased and body language indicated that students were listening to Jeremy. Jeremy's perspective, an asset in the eyes of the teacher, was not valued until I explicitly made it valued by explaining that I wanted to hear what he had to say.

Another strategy to utilize students' assets was to bridge the gap between their personal and academic lives. In doing so, students' assets took the form of unique

perspectives of the question or problem that was posed. This usually occurred in the journaling portion of lessons, which I called *Informal Writing*. By calling the journaling Informal Writing, I aimed to reduce the stakes involved. Informal Writing was utilized mainly as a warm-up activity, but it also called for unique perspectives. Students wrote about their experience of the challenges that the characters in the text encountered. Another example comes from a video recording from September 26th. The students had completed an Informal Writing exercise in which they empathized with the characters in the novel with which they were working. The novel described the bunkhouse where the characters would be housed, and the description included an apple box that had been converted to a shelf for each resident to keep his belongings. The Informal Writing prompt asked students to empathize with the characters and imagine how they'd feel if they had to put all of their possessions in an apple box. I had brought an apple box from home to help students understand the size of the space that the characters had. The students demonstrated high engagement with the activity. After I presented the activity, students got to writing. With the ten students visible in the video frame, their body language indicated that they were engaged with the activity. Students could be seen contemplating the implications of such limited belongings. Two students stared at the box for a few moments, and the others began writing immediately.

Another example comes from October 7th, six weeks into the school year, students were prompted to write about someone they know who had a dream, and to explore the ways that dream affected that person. Additionally, students were prompted to write at least five complete sentences. The videos indicate that students engaged in this activity. Students were given five minutes to complete the writing, but not all

students needed the whole five minutes. At the outset of the activity, all students in the video frame except one began to work on the writing prompt. The one who didn't immediately asked the question, "What if you don't know anyone with a strong dream?" I then rephrased the question to the whole class, "Gary claims that he doesn't know anyone with a really strong dream. So Gary, you can think about yourself, ok?" This rephrasing served the purpose of not only encouraging the student to engage in the activity despite the fact that he felt it was inaccessible, but it also demonstrated utilizing an asset that that particular student brought in the form of his unique perspective. Gary did not have an immediate response to the writing prompt, but his clarifying question, which was based in an asset of his, helped to provide clarity to the other students in the classroom. Additionally, when given the opportunity to write about himself, Gary engaged in the activity and wrote for approximately three minutes, adequate time for that student to meet the length requirement.

Engagement is a multifaceted phenomenon; there is likely to be no direct correlation among my strategies and student engagement, but assigning value to assets may be a key part in increasing engagement. One possible explanation for the perception of engagement when assigning value to assets could be rooted in the relationships that I forged with students. Students knew that I cared about them, both personally and academically, as indicated by their surveys and interviews. Additionally, the majority of students indicated on their surveys that they felt that I believed in their ability to complete the work. Either the relationships fostered in the classroom or my own belief in students' abilities to complete the work and the learning could have contributed to a convoluted finding regarding assets and engagement.

Another possible explanation for the perception of engagement could be the expectations that were established in the classroom. Students were held to high behavioral and academic expectations. I believe that students could have been attuned to the elements of the class to which I assigned value, thinking that they were important. Students could have adhered to these expectations out of a sense of fear, either in terms of consequences or academically, thinking that something I to which I assigned value could come up on a test or assessment later.

Summary of Findings

Through this action research project, I sought to implement actions that could lead to engagement, both behavioral and academic. I created a classroom that was developmentally responsive and highly structured as well as one that utilized assets. Through data analysis, I found that students highly value relationships and expect teachers to exhibit a certain amount of authority; I also found that assets need to have an assigned value, or else they are not seen as assets. The connection between students' personal and academic lives is not something seen as welcome in by the students themselves, but assigning value to prior experiences and unique perspectives may help students to see both personal and prior academic experiences as valuable in the classroom.

Implications

The research that has been presented is not intended to be conclusive or exhaustive. There will always be more to research and more to learn about teaching. Given that this was my first experience being the primary teacher in the room for any extended period of time, my understanding about teaching is still developing. My

inexperience as a teacher and a researcher may have influenced my findings. Although I tried to borrow principles from grounded theory and analyze the data with an open mind, my relationships with the students may have diluted my findings and could be a challenge to the reliability of my findings. Additionally, this research project was conducted over a relatively short period of time, ten weeks. This abbreviated research period could have challenged the dependability of my findings, as students could have been experiencing a novelty factor, being in a new school with a new teacher. I attempted to minimize this sentiment by taking over the class from day one as the primary teacher. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of emphasizing relationships in the classroom over a longer period of time. I believe that relationships in the classroom are monumental in learning for a variety of reasons, and I will continue to emphasize the importance thereof.

Another implication for my future practice would be the types of discussions. I found that large-group discussions that encompassed the entire class were effective. I implemented one instance of small group discussions, with up to eight students in each group. I believe that this singular instruction method may challenge the credibility of my research. Since there was one dominant instructional strategy related to discussions, the students may have learned how to behave in large-group discussions, which could have skewed my ideas of behavioral engagement. Although there was one instance of a different type of discussion in my data sources, as I move forward in my practice, I will make sure to include different types of discussions, including more small group discussions with smaller groups and seminars. Also, I believe that Cohen & Lotan's (2014) ideas around groupwork would be beneficial as an even further step in

discussions. The principles that became the bases for my findings, relationships, authority, and assets, are beneficial for the teacher to see in the students, but I believe that these principles can lay the foundation for a truly transformative and democratic classroom, when students begin to value these three principles among themselves.

Areas for Further Research

In a discussion-based classroom, students are encouraged to provide their unique perspectives that are based in prior experiences, both academic and personal. Although I found that many students were engaged in the classroom practices that I implemented, I believe that classroom discussions could be a barrier for some students. I was in a classroom with few English Language Learners (ELL) and no designated Academic English Learners (AEL). One area in which further research is needed is in the effectiveness of discussions in terms of learning for both ELLs and AELs. There could be great potential for these students in a discussion-based classroom, as oral communication is acquired before written communication when learning a second language (Freeman & Freeman, 2009).

Another area for further research would be the utilization of assets. Students enter the classroom with assets, some of which are more obvious than others. I learned that as a teacher I have great power in how students value those assets, both their own and those of their peers. One key element in finding these assets in a classroom is immersion in the school. I was fortunate enough to be sharing a classroom with one of the senior-most teachers in the building. This teacher was also a football and baseball coach. I believe that those factors altered students' perceptions of me as a teacher, bestowing some sense of status upon me as an educator. Additionally, I had first

entered the school approximately one year before the study began. These nuances also allowed me to get to know the school very well, despite my limited time there. I believe that effective teaching must include a continuous evolution and development of one's practice, one facet of which should include learning more about the community, school, and students.

Another area for further research is the relationships that I built with students. Entering my research study, I knew that building relationships with students was important. I believe that further research is needed to determine the extent to which these relationships directly affected student engagement. I found that many students were willing to talk about personal issues and interests, but seemed reluctant to discuss academic challenges or struggles outside of the parameters of class. Educators would benefit from determining which specific types of relationships are most beneficial to students.

Closing Comments

Despite my efforts to empower students, I still felt that my classroom was teacher-centered, in that I was leading large-group discussions. Although whole-class discussions were effective in some ways, I would like to have students be at the center of instruction. As I develop my practice, I will work to develop discussion skills so that I, as the teacher, am more of a facilitator rather than a director. I found that when students answered questions, their responses were directed at me; I would like to encourage inter-student discussion. There was one instance in my student teaching in which I utilized small-group discussions. This strategy was surprisingly effective. In my

future teaching I will use this strategy more frequently, especially as a groupwork strategies.

Throughout this research process, I began to define and refine my practice as an educator. I found the process of reflecting on my practice to be beneficial, and I will continue to do so. I found that I can affect student engagement by building and fostering relationships with my students. These relationships can contribute to setting and maintaining both academic and behavioral expectations. These relationships allowed me as the teacher to instill my belief in students' abilities. I was also able to develop my authoritative persona as an educator, which may have contributed to engagement. Also, I found that all students have assets, but they were not valued until I assigned value to them. I believe that my relationships with students and my authority in the classroom helped to add value to the assets in the classroom.

As an educator, I believe strongly in student empowerment and will continue to seek practices that will empower students. I believe that classroom discussions can be a step in the right direction. Although I am not at a skill level that I would like to be, I believe that I am well along my journey. I want my classroom to be a place for every student; I want my students to feel like they belong and that their perspectives and experiences are valued. This understanding needs to be my guiding framework as I begin my work as a professional educator. The classroom should not simply be a place where teachers give students knowledge and expect them to repeat it on a test. The amount of time that students spend in the classroom has the potential to have profound effects as they develop. As an educator, I believe that it is my duty to help raise citizens

of my own community, citizens who respect, listen to, and value the perspectives of their fellows.

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Appendix A

Survey 1

1. What is your favorite class? What makes it your favorite?
2. Who is your favorite teacher? What does that person do to make you like him/her?
3. Do you think that your teachers believe in you?
4. Do you think that your teachers show you respect?
5. What do you think is more important: learning the subject or earning a good grade? Why?
6. Do you think about dropping out of school? Why?
7. Do you think your teachers care about you as a person?

Appendix B

Survey 2

1. Do you feel like you belong in school? Why or why not?

2. Do you feel like your personal experience is valued in school? Why or why not?

3. Do you feel like your classes are appropriately difficult? Why or why not?

4. Do you find school interesting? Why or why not?

5. Do you try your hardest in school? Why or why not?

6. Do you feel like your teachers believe in you? Why or why not?