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Defining and Increasing Student Engagement Using Flexible Seating in Elementary Classrooms

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Defining and Increasing Student Engagement
Using Flexible Seating in Elementary Classrooms
by
Jacklyn Phillips
April 2023

Master's Project
Submitted to the College of Education
At Grand Valley State University
In partial fulfillment of the
Degree of Master of Education



The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Jacklyn Phillips in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Educational Leadership.

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Jacklyn Phillips

Abstract

Education has mostly stayed the same since the 19th century, yet students and teachers have changed. Teachers once defined student engagement as the time students spent working on the task assigned. However, today there are many definitions for student engagement; which is correct? Researchers have defined student engagement as anything from "time on task" to seven different levels of engagement (Merwin, 1969, as cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 34; Schlechty, 2011). There is no one standard definition for student engagement. The concern is how educators increase engagement. This project suggests that educators move out of the 19th-century classroom setting and replace it with modern, flexible seating in order to increase engagement. Early studies have shown increases in student engagement when implementing flexible seating.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Teachers and administrators try to find ways to get their students' attention and get them involved in their education. Educators are looking to increase student engagement, but how is it defined? Is student engagement students staring at the teacher? Does it include students taking notes and completing assignments? How can educators get and keep students engaged when so many different opinions exist on how student engagement is defined? Teachers must understand the various facets of student engagement to create an environment that fosters it. Student engagement must exist at all levels of education. Therefore, all teachers, administrators, and school staff must understand how to define student engagement to create, maintain, and increase it in every classroom.

Importance and Rationale of Project

Negative social behaviors, including violence, substance abuse, and student dropout rates, are linked to low student engagement (Payne et al., 2003). Approximately 91% of first, third, and 5th-grade students spent 95% of their time working alone or listening to a teacher (Pianta et al., 2007). Students who are not engaged in school are more likely to drop out. In a survey conducted by Gallup of 5 million U.S. students, 47% reported they were "not engaged," and 29% declared themselves "actively disengaged" (Hodges, 2018, n.p.). Approximately 2 million people between the ages of 16-24 have left school and lack the necessary credentials to obtain most jobs in the United States (Jensen, 2013; Dropout rates, n.d.). If the educational community fails to engage students in their learning, we, as a society, will pay the price. As it stands, the cost to the U.S. economy is approximately "\$272,000 over [their] lifetime" ("*Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States*," n.d.). This number is in terms of their reliance on public

tax dollars for welfare assistance, Medicaid and Medicare, the criminal justice system, and low tax contributions due to their lower income levels ("*Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States*," n.d.). However, there is a way to prevent future generations from being negative statistics. Schools must increase student engagement.

The direct link between student engagement and learning is unmistakable (Watson & Berry, 2022). A study found that engaged students learn more, complete school, and have higher levels of self-confidence (Estell & Perdue, 2013). According to Fredricks & Blumenfeld et al., (2016), when students are engaged in school, they will build an interest in school and learning and be better behaved. According to Gallup Research, 2.5% of students who considered themselves "engaged" state they earn higher scores, and 4.5% of students have a more positive attitude toward their future than their counterparts (Hodges, 2018, n.p.). Student engagement is associated with fewer absences, higher teacher and staff morale, lower staff turnover, and fewer student health concerns (Love et al., 2022).

Background of the Project

Educational researchers have been trying to define student engagement since John Dewey published "Education and Democracy" in 1916. Tyler's pioneering research in 1935 articulated the idea of student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Tyler (1957) concluded that the more time students spend on their studies, the more learning they achieve; it is not what the teacher is doing but rather what the student does that results in learning (Groccia, 2018). Linked to Tyler's philosophy is the work of Merwin in 1969, who coined the term "time on task" (Merwin, 1969, as cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 34). Pace (1984) expands on Merwin's idea to include "quality of effort" (Pace, 1984, p. 11). The work of Chickering and Gamson (1989) arguably expands the definition of student engagement with their publication of "*Seven Principles of Effective*

Undergraduate Education" (Ismail, 2018). The pair challenged to elevate the standard definition of student engagement, "time on task," to encompass multi-level learning. Chickering & Gamson (1999) created a framework for undergraduate education engagement called "active learning."

These philosophies lead to the creation of several think tank organizations. In the 1960s, Robert Pace's research established the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), to study the quality and amount of time students spent using their school's resources (About *NSSE*, n.d.). While CSEQ closed in 2014, it played a vital role in how colleges and universities shaped student engagement and programs (About *NSSE*, n.d.). The National Survey of Students Engagement (NSSE) and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) have replaced CSEQ (*Survey Instruments*, n.d.). Through student engagement surveys, the BCSSE and the NSSE provide four-year institutions with information about the academic and institutional interaction habits of first- and fourth-year college students (About *NSSE*, n.d.). The BCSSE and the NSSE help higher-level institutions promote and increase student engagement. The twentieth century's researchers, psychologists, and educators created several philosophies regarding student engagement. However, with so many opinions, it begs the question, what is student engagement?

Statement of Purpose

In order to provide an atmosphere where students can foster all aspects of their mind (cognitive), body (behavior), and soul (emotion) education has to offer them an environment to do so. This project aims to create professional learning experiences for all educators to show and teach them how to transform their traditional classroom design into a flipped or flex classroom to encourage student engagement. The professional learning series will utilize the learning experience in a flexible classroom environment and provide insight into how flexible classrooms

can increase student engagement when used correctly. The preliminary research indicates that student engagement does increase when flexible classrooms are utilized.

Objectives of the Project

This project aims to remove the stagnant school classroom environment where students view school as "a mere grade game... with as little effort as possible" (quoted by Pope, 2002, cited in Fredricks et al., 2004, p.60). School should be where students rush to the room, are happy and motivated to learn, and actively participate in their education. Schools need to be in warm, inviting places that foster development and belonging and fit the needs of all stakeholders (Olivier et al., 2020). By flipping the traditional classroom design, educators can create classrooms that nurture students' behavioral engagement, bolster their cognitive engagement, and heighten their emotional engagement. Changing how teachers approach their classroom setup, structure, and management will be difficult. However, with professional learning and experience, tools, time, and trial and error, teachers that commit to changing the status quo will see increased engagement from their students and themselves. By using flexible seating classrooms, teachers can increase student engagement.

Definition of Terms

Student Engagement: in the simplest form, "time on task" is how much time a student spends on their studies (Astin, 1999, p. 518).

Involvement: a student is involved in their education when they are actively focused on all levels, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021).

Disengagement: when a student disconnects from the learning experience/processes expected of them (Schlechty, 2011).

Cognitive Engagement: is a person's ability to think (Kuh, 2009).

Behavioral Engagement: refers to the habits and or actions a student displays while interacting with their schoolwork/activities (Danielson, 2007).

Emotional Engagement: when a student can connect to their education in meaningful and profound ways (Love et al., 2022).

Social Engagement: using strategies such as group projects and work or think-pair-share are used to create social connections to the student's learning, thus playing an active role in their learning (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021)

Institution: for the scope of this project, describe any educational establishment

College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ): a think tank that studies the amount of time students spend using their school's resources, closed in 2014 (Groccia, 2018).

National Survey of Students Engagement (NSSE) and Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE): replaced CSEQ, providing four-year institutions with data regarding the scholarly interactions of the schools' first-year students and seniors (About NSSE, n.d.; Survey Instruments, n.d.).

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES): a non-partisan part of the U.S. Department of Education that provides evidence based on research of educational practices (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Glossary of Education Reform: a dictionary of commonly used educational terms. The glossary is a free online service in conjunction with Great Schools and the Education Writers Association (Sabbott, 2016).

Flipped/ flexible classroom: a classroom with multiple seating and table options for students and teachers throughout the day.

Traditional classroom: classrooms arranged with desks/tables and chairs in a specific order that works for the teacher or school.

Professional learning: workshop where interested parties attend to gain new skills in their respected profession/field.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC): small groups of professionals interacting with one another to improve, create, maintain, and learn in a specific area of need or interest.

Scope of the Project

The objective of the project is to create a year-long professional experience series for all educators to show them how to initiate and maintain a flexible seating classroom. Upon completing the professional series, teachers will know how to incorporate flexible seating in their classrooms and use it to promote, encourage and increase engagement.

The plan is to involve the whole district in the year-long professional development series. The district staff will join the first season in July or August, the second in mid-October/November, the third in mid-January/February, and the last in April/May. Tailoring each session to the district's demographic and grade-level needs is imperative. The series will take place at their location(s) to fully immerse the educators into a flexible classroom atmosphere. The attendees will learn how student engagement is defined and why increasing it is vital to their success as educators and the success of their students. They will learn how to set up classroom norms, policies, procedures, and management concerning a flex classroom, focusing on increasing student engagement. The sessions will also show teachers how to use their spaces in new ways. Each school will establish professional learning communities (PLC) within their schools to continue to learn and grow from one another.

Limitations of the Project

The limitations of this project are various. The first possible limitation is teacher buy-in. Suppose the teachers are only partially on board with flexible seating. In that case, it will make it difficult for the school to have consistency between grade levels, causing engagement to decrease for students that thrive in non-traditional seating. The second limitation is the cost of seating found online with a quick search for flexible seating. Flexible seating does not have to be fancy or expensive. For administration and the school board, their reservations could be the need for research-based evidence that flex seating does increase engagement. While the research is promising, the discipline is small within educational research. Another limitation could be parents needing help understanding why their student chooses to sit on a pillow instead of a chair. Some parents may believe that the way it was for them was just fine, so why change it?

The most significant challenge will be the need for professional learning experiences focusing on flexible seating and engagement. Despite the limitations, it is essential to implement flexible seating to increase student engagement in order to avoid future generations from leaving school and contributing to an already overstrained economy.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter includes the literature regarding student engagement and a comprehensive evaluation of the most influential work in the field to date. Within the research and evaluation, there are four overarching and interconnected topics, (1) defining student engagement-based leading researchers, (2) the three different dimensions of student engagement, (3) degrees of engagement, and (4) the lack of engagement distinctions. The summary section will highlight the key findings of the research findings. The conclusion, and the why, will explain how the key points from the project are incorporated.

Theory/Rationale

Student engagement is a complex phrase that has evolved since the early-1900s. With education and student achievement at the forefront of conversation amongst politicians, economics, educators, and parents, so has the conversation of getting students engaged in their education.

Educators want nothing more than for students to be involved in their learning. They want a bustling classroom full of purposeful learning. Most teachers plan lessons with the sole purpose of getting students out of their seats and their hands dirty (so of speak). Otherwise engaged, whether it be in math, where students are measuring each other using inches and feet, or social studies, where they drafted and wrote, with a quill, a student Bill of Rights, or in science where students use coca to simulate pollination. Nevertheless, is this engagement, or is it keeping them entrained? According to research, do educators know what student engagement is and what it is not? Can educators do something to increase engagement in their classrooms?

Research/Evaluation

Defining Student Engagement

Ask a teacher; they will say student engagement is when students pay attention and work on the task; however, this definition needs to be simplified. The twentieth century expanded the definitions and research of student engagement; however, the twenty-first century is expanding the field. Therefore, a closer look into modern definitions is warranted.

The Glossary of Education Reform (Sabbott, 2016) states that student engagement, in its simplest form, "refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation, they have to learn and progress in their education" (Sabbott, 2016, n.p.). The glossary has taken the works of twentieth-century researchers and molded them together to articulate a definition. However, the glossary has another entry for student engagement, which expands the definition to be a verb in which the school and its staff create programs to immerse students into the learning processes available at their institutions. The Glossary of Education Reform states, "ways in which school leaders, educators, and other adults might "engage" students more fully in the governance and decision-making processes in school" (Sabbott, 2016, n.p.). The glossary entry for student engagement provides a well-rounded definition, but these are not the only definitions. The proceeding paragraphs will examine several research-based definitions from various disciplines, education, economics, medicine, psychology, and sociology, to better assess student engagement.

Teachers are called upon to increase and foster student engagement, but with many different and some unique definitions, how can teachers accomplish this? Educators are contending with this as the call for increased student engagement increases. A closer examination of the definitions finds an interconnection between most research and the

definitions, except for a few outliers. The interrelated nature of these philosophies is within the types of engagement among the researchers.

Given the complex nature of the English language, defining student engagement can be complicated. Yang et al., (2022) explained student engagement as time and energy, positive emotions, such as desire, demand, and motivation, as well as learning strategies, effort, and experiences. Yang et al., (2022) portray the research from Kuh (2009), Lau & Roeser (2002), and Bomia (2007) to provide a basis for the research.

Salmela-Aro et al., (2021) refer to student engagement as the "holy grail of learning" and thus define it by the student's involvement with their studies, being a part of the day-to-day classroom, in its procedures and activities (p. 258). In reviewing a decade of student engagement research, Salmela-Aro et al., (2020) found that regardless of previous studies, more needs to be researched. The team suggests that more non-western studies occur to form a unilateral consensus on the topic.

Astin (1999), one of the earlier researchers of student engagement, refers to the practice of involvement. Astin (1999) states that students involved in the learning process devote much "physical and psychological energy" to studying, participating in extracurricular activities, and meeting with teachers (p. 518). A portion of Astin's research relates to Tyler's (1935) notion of "time on task" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). However, Astin (1999) is credited with the idea of student involvement in terms of individual behaviors, but rather what the "students invest..." (Axelson & Flick, 2010, p.40). With Astin's (1999) revelation, student engagement was no longer as simple as time plus effort equals learning.

Kuh (2001, 2009) defined student engagement as "the time and energy students devote to activities...linked to desired outcomes...and what institutions do to induce students to participate

in these activities" (p. 683). Kuh (2009) and Wolf-Wendel et al., (2009) share the exact two-fold definition, as does (Sabbott, 2016) in the Glossary of Education Reform. Kuh (2009), Mu et al., (2019), and Wolf-Wendel et al., (2009) research and definitions coincide with the work of Tyler (1935), Pace (1984), and other earlier researchers.

Lau and Roeser (2002) define engagement as one not linked to what the institution does but rather to the student's behaviors. Lau and Roeser (2002) define engagement as a student's "emotional valence," whether the student has positive emotions, "focus and reflectivity," paying attention using skills they have learned, time, and how often the student is completing schoolwork outside of school hours (p. 144). Lau and Roeser (2002) outline student engagement as the student getting out of their education and what they put into it.

Types of Engagement

Like most topics, some subsections warrant investigation, and unlike the definitions, many researchers agree on the following components of student engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. These distinctions are significant because one school may consider student engagement not by the larger context described earlier but rather within the confines of the subsets.

Behavioral Engagement

According to Salmela-Aro et al., (2021), behavioral engagement is approximately 70% of the current research regarding student engagement. Student behavior has a significant impact on the classroom environment. By addressing student behavioral engagement, the amount of time teachers can spend on other faucets of engagement can increase.

Yang et al., (2022) describes behavioral engagement as "autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors"; in other words, a teacher-created space where they can support student listening, give

students the freedom to work in their way, student talk, and where students can manipulate their surroundings to fit their learning style (p. 408). According to Yang et al., (2022), this resource should be tapped into to encourage a more substantial level of student or energy engagement. Yang et al., (2022) found that when a teacher promotes autonomy, according to the student's perception, student engagement increases.

For Schlechty (2011), behavioral engagement does not exist. If a student follows the rules and completes the assigned task, the student behaves but possibly needs to be more engaged. According to Schlechty (2011), students who operate only at behavioral engagement respond to "extrinsic rewards," such as grades, praise, after-school participation, and more (p.14). He resolves that if a student is genuinely engaged, all forms of extrinsic motivation can cease, and the student will continue on the same path. According to Schlechty (2011), behavior is not engagement. The student is meeting the status quo.

Danielson (2007) refers to behavioral engagement as "structure and pacing," where she describes daily routines, classroom pacing, and management (p. 84). Danielson (2007) stated that full engagement across all three would thrive if the classroom norms were established and built with cognitive and emotional engagement in mind. Danielson (2007) puts little investment into behavioral engagement and instead focuses her work on cognitive engagement, as described later.

Cognitive Engagement

Another facet of student engagement is cognitive engagement. Simply put, cognition is a person's ability to think. In education, the level and thinking processes are vital to engagement. Yang et al., (2022) states that cognitive engagement is absorption, which they define as one's "total immersion in schoolwork or activities" (p. 408). Yang et al. (2022) stance on engagement

is the idea of autonomy with support or suppression; therefore, cognitive engagement links to either style. Yang et al., (2002) research showed that students' effectiveness engagement increases and decreases with the level of encouragement they feel they receive. Thus, a student's overall engagement, regardless of type, shifts throughout their education.

According to Schlechty (2011), cognitive engagement is not a list of verbs, such as apply, create, and evaluate, but relative levels of cognitive processes that Schlechty describes as "profound learning" (p. 22). Schlechty states that the knowledge and skills students acquire build their cognitive pathways, thus shaping the way students understand the world. Schlechty (2011) found that one's cognitive abilities are different among all learners, and as such, measuring their cognitive engagement proves difficult on a scale of objectives. He continues that if students can recall information they have learned "profoundly," it becomes a part of their vast network of knowledge (Schlechty, 2022, p. 23).

Of the three major subgroups, behavioral and intellectual engagements are the most researched and discussed; this is understandable, and on most levels, educators can control these things to a degree. Teachers and administrators can create classrooms with strong curriculums, knowledgeable teachers, and technologies that will build cognitive levels in students. Institutions can establish classroom management processes and a school culture that promotes strong student and staff behaviors and learning, on the other hand, schools cannot do much about the emotional state of students' home life.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is the least discussed subgroup by all researchers in this project's scope. Emotions cannot be defined, while some try. A student's emotional state at school may

have nothing to do with their education but outside forces. Nevertheless, emotional engagement still stands as a part of overall student engagement.

Sabbot (2016), in *The Glossary of Educational Reform*, defines emotional engagement as a school's strategy to create a positive school culture and reduce the number of negative influences and behaviors that may influence students to drop out. Accordingly, schools may employ counselors, behavior interventionists, or peer-to-peer groups to foster relationships between students and adults and student-to-student.

Yang et al. (2022) discusses emotions, not emotional engagement. Yang et al., (2022) state that emotional well-being, while it can be either positive or negative, is part of the psychological process that all students deal with that affects the behavioral and cognitive engagement and abilities of every student.

Salmela-Aro et al. (2021) define emotional engagement as a psychological experience. For Salmela-Aro et al. (2021), emotional engagement is only positive, allowing students to have effective and meaningful experiences in their educational aspirations. In addition, Salmela-Aro (2021) also states that emotional engagement is how a student feels about school in general.

Complete Intellectual Capacity

Groccia (2018), rather than characterizing any one subgroup, refers to the whole as "engagement-doing, feeling, thinking" (p. 14). Groccia (2018) does not break each into specific categories. The research presented focuses on the whole, working together among all involved parties. According to Groccia (2018), who adopted the model of, (Burns et al., 2004; Groccia & Hunter, 2012; cited in (Groccia, 2018) show how doing(behavior), feeling (emotion), and thinking (cognitive) are central as each component of the educational process uses a small part of the whole engagement methodology.

Degrees of Engagement

Understandably it is impossible to be completely immersed in any one activity all the time. Yang et al., (2022) outlined three degrees of engagement that, according to their study, a student displays a majority of the time; high engagement/low burnout, average engagement/average burnout, and low engagement/high burnout. Yang et al., (2022) found that the degree of engagement rose as levels of exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inadequacy decreased. In reverse, as exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inadequacy rose, the level of "burnout" increased (p. 412). Interestingly, the students with the highest levels of all three categories were slightly more engaged than the moderately burned-out group, whose levels were more than half that of the burned-out group.

Schlechty (2011) outlines four levels of engagement, "engagement, compliance, strategic compliance, ritual compliance, and retreatism" (p. 16). Engagement is when a student can connect to the learning. These students show diligence. They are committed to their education. They have perseverance when faced with challenges. According to Schlechty (2011), compliance is when a student follows expectations. These students are said not to find meaning or purpose in school. Strategic compliance is when a student completes the bare minimum to avoid punishment from home or school. The description of ritual compliance is an innate avoidance response. Ritually compliant students are only avoiding repercussions. Retreatism is when a student will not work but does not distract the learning process of others. The student has no desire to complete or participate in classroom activities, is useless under direct supervision, and then only at a ritual behavior level and rebellion.

Lack of Engagement

Where there is engagement of any form, there is bound to be disengagement. According to Danielson (2007), a disengaged student is easy to find. They can manifest disruptive behaviors, sleeping in class, drawing, whispering to their neighbor, or using their electronic device for non-approved tasks.

Schlechty (2011) refers to disengagement as "rebellion;" it is essential to note that of all degrees of engagement, rebellion is the only one that constitutes a lack of engagement (p.16). Rebellion for Schlechty (2011) resembles a flat-out refusal from the student to complete any school-related task. Rebellious students often take up instructional or other class time with their negative behaviors and public refusal.

Summary

Student engagement is a complex and necessary facet of education. There are a variety of definitions, types, and degrees of engagement. No one is the same, which makes educators' ability to increase engagement difficult, at best. There are beliefs that student engagement should stimulate the whole body, behavior, cognition, and emotions. Other schools of thought believe engagement is strictly behavior or cognitive ability. A few researchers state that educators must tap into students' emotions to enable engagement. Then there are the researchers that suggest that student engagement is on the part of the institution to create. Others feel that if a student does not desire to engage in their education, there is nothing schools can do to change that. However, another idea is that students are almost always engaged on some level; it depends on the situation. No matter what the school of thought is, student engagement matters.

The Conclusion: The Why

Often educators ask, why do I need to know this? Why is this important, and am I ever going to use this? The answers are simple, YES! Student engagement matters whether you teach

pre-k or graduate classes. Teachers must learn what engagement looks, feels, and sounds like. Teachers have much to offer, but learning will only occur if the student is motivated. In primary education, standards, tests, and achievement goals are set by outside forces, and like it or not, the schools must get students to "buy in"; otherwise, the school will cease to exist, yet the students will. According to Sabbott (2016), in *The Glossary of Education Reform*, the importance of understanding student engagement is to allow the field of education to promote and discuss strategies for educational development.

For Schlechty (2011), the reason is to ensure that the students are the central focus of education, not standardized tests and politics. Understanding how student engagement is defined and practiced allows educators, parents, and society to create the necessary extrinsic factors that allow students to develop their intrinsic reasoning behind gaining an education.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

The 21st century is a global society. Critical thinking skills are required to synthesize terabytes of information much faster than in previous generations; this is especially true for primary and secondary education students. However, three-fourths of U.S. high school students report disengagement in and about their education (Hodges, 2018). Approximately 33% of employees report engagement in their workplace, which coincides with student engagement (Hodges, 2018). In a global society, our population needs to be actively present at school and on the job if we as a nation want to become a global economic power.

Schools are where children learn to become adults; if students lack engagement in school, how will they know how to be engaged in their work? School teachers are responsible for showing kids how to be and get excited about their education, yet many teachers need to learn what student engagement means and what it looks and sounds like. Therefore, teachers need a professional learning experience that will transform 19th-century classrooms into modern 21st-century learning centers that actively entice students to learn using their natural curiosity. Through modeling and professional learning experiences, the goal is to show what student engagement is and how to implement and use flexible seating classrooms to encourage and promote engagement.

The project is a professional learning series focusing on understanding the complexity of student engagement. Professional learning through a flexible seating environment will provide a comprehensive examination of what student engagement is and what it is not. As a part of the series, participants will experience firsthand a traditional classroom and the expectations set by school social norms. Then they will experience learning in a flex classroom and a new set of

expectations. In each part of the series, teachers receive helpful hints to get started; teachers and administration will work together to create their start-up materials, classroom management strategies, and policy and procedure information that works for their unique demographic to assist them in implementing a flex classroom. Sessions two through four will aid teachers in diving deeper into student engagement and using their environment, created and natural, to promote the full engagement of all learners, including themselves. During each series session, a featured guest speaker will explain the benefits of student engagement using research for each subgroup within the school community. The series will scaffold implementation, usage, methods, strategies, common pitfalls, concerns, and evaluation. The evaluation of the series will occur in two ways, first in the teachers' professional learning community meetings. Second, through visits from the series team to observe and then provide constructive criticism and praise to the school. Implementation will start before the start of the new school year and continue throughout the year to build flexible classrooms that gain strength and breed engagement.

Project Components

The need to find sustainable ways to increase student engagement is critical to the education of the next generations. 91% of primary and secondary school superintendents reported that student engagement is their highest priority (Calderon & Jones, 2018). Thus, the need for teachers to understand how student engagement is defined and be able to implement measures to increase student engagement is critical to student success. Therefore, a four-part professional learning series defining student engagement and using flexible seating as a tool to increase student engagement needs to occur within each school district.

The first step is to get district leaders intrigued through targeted marketing campaigns using the internet, school visits, flyers, and social media campaigns. Once a school district has

registered, they will participate in the four sessions of the professional learning series. Each session will focus on various aspects of defining student engagement and integrating flexible seating within the school to increase student engagement.

Throughout the two-day experience of session one, educators will be divided according to grade level to tailor each participant's experience. The first day is to recreate the students' experience in traditional classroom settings. On day two, participants immerse in a flexible classroom where they are free to move and interact with others in a way they may not have experienced before, thus experiencing student engagement through their lens.

The objectives for session one are to increase the learners' knowledge and understanding of how student engagement is defined. In addition, increasing student engagement is imperative and providing the learner with both learning environments experienced by students daily. Participants will reflect on their experiences in both seating environments and create a realistic plan to flip classrooms to increase student engagement.

During the first day, participants will be seated in a traditional classroom setting, with rows of desks and chairs, assigned seating by alphabetical order, and required to follow the same rules and procedures as they require of their students. For example, if students are to have their belongings on a hook in the back of the room or placed at their desks, the educators will do the same. If the school requires students to ask for permission before leaving their seats, educators must do the same regardless of the reason. The class will follow the same schedule as their students, for example, restroom and lunch breaks. For lunch, the educator must follow the same procedures the school has in place. For instance, if the students walk in line to the lunchroom and sit in assigned seats, the educators will do the same. Like student dismissal, educators' dismissal will consist of being called by their home location to collect their belongings and make their way

to their car, thus dismissal. These mandates are essential in providing an environment where educators experience their students' day and the rigid nature of a traditional classroom. The presentation regarding student engagement will occur throughout the day.

The presentation will cover the current problems regarding the need for more student engagement and why it is critical to increase it in any classroom setting. It will use direct teaching to instruct the participants on the history behind student engagement and what recent research says about it. As seen within the linked PowerPoint presentation, participants will be given handouts to take notes regarding the information, much like the teacher's expectations of students throughout the day. Participants will share their thoughts on the presented information. However, certain obstacles will be in place to show students' difficulties when teachers ask students to share with other students in a traditional classroom. As we wrap up day one, participants will reflect on their experiences.

As day two begins, participants will walk into transformed classrooms. The wall decor will remain the same. However, the seating will have a mixture of tall bar stools, yoga balls, saucer chairs, floor pillows, bungee chairs, beach chairs, and traditional chairs. The writing surfaces will combine high-top tables, lap desks, smooth decorative clipboards, a 'U' table, handheld whiteboards, desks, and the floor. Both verbal and visual directions as to where to sit will be displayed. Participants are to sit where they think they will work the best. There will be instrumental music playing in the background as well. As they settle in, the instructor will bring the room to attention using a soft chime.

The instructor will explain that the participants are experiencing a flexible seating classroom. The class will be under direct instruction for the next few minutes as they walk through a sample of classroom expectations using a flexible seating board. The participants will

model proper treatment of the classroom setting, modeling how to get students to interact with the new classroom furniture and materials. Afterward, participants will be asked to work with their grade level partners (if possible) or someone in one grade higher or lower to formulate preliminary classroom rules using a brainstorming worksheet. Once participants have created their rules, we will discuss the research driving the use of flexible seating to increase student engagement.

Once the direct instruction is complete, groups will examine some research in small groups using a round-robin strategy. For this, they will find their number partner from the day before, designed to show the function of a flexible seating room and how much easier they can find and get with their partner. The pairs will have at least 25 minutes to engage in the activity. The attendees will then revisit the rules they created and make revisions based on their discoveries. The rest of day two will be spent using and applying the participants' rules, policies, and procedures to see what could happen in their classrooms and allowing them to adjust as necessary. Attendees will use all the seating and table options to see what they may and may not like in their settings. Everyone will have the presentation to take notes on. They will create a "shopping list" of what seating and table options they want, need, and would love to have to make flexible seating work in their classroom. They will investigate the cost of the items and find alternatives to some of the higher-priced items they desire. This activity will show participants why more schools do not do flexible seating and the investment their school is making, all while getting the teachers to think outside the box, just as they ask students to do daily. Before the end of the session, we will announce the date and objectives for the next series. The presenter's contact information and role will be shared. As day two wraps up, participants will be encouraged to meet with the presenters to discuss anything, just as teachers want to talk

to their students outside of classroom lessons. Presenters will circulate the room to interact with participants as well.

As mentioned earlier, this professional learning experience is a four-part series. A sample of the first session outlines in the PowerPoint, appendix A. Below are the other three parts. The second session, "Visit, Observer, Chat," will occur approximately two months after the first. The original presenter will revisit the school(s), spending the first three days inside each teacher's classroom observing and evaluating how they use flexible seating and the levels of classroom engagement throughout the class period. While the teachers will know when the presenters will be in town, the specific day and time of the visit will be unknown; this design is not a "gotcha" situation but rather a glimpse into the fundamental workings of the flexible classroom and its student engagement. During each visit, the observer will take detailed notes of what is and is not working. In addition, the presenters will meet with the building-level administration to determine the needs of the school and individual staff members. On Friday, the whole staff and the presenters will meet to present to increase the staff's knowledge, and understanding of student engagement and why increasing it is imperative. Afterward, each teacher individually will meet with their observer and discuss what is and is not working based on the observations and teacher input. Each teacher will be given a list of suggestions for improvement or tweaking that the observer feels are necessary to increase engagement.

At the wrap-up of visit 1, the whole group will meet again to form the school(s) professional learning communities (PLC) within each building. The individuals selected as leaders for the PLC(s) will be responsible for formulating the norms, policies, and procedures for group meetings and establishing meeting dates and times each month. In addition, the PLC will be responsible for collecting data on student engagement within their building, finding and

introducing new research (if needed to be provided by the presenters) within the field to the whole staff, as well as observing and meeting with struggling teachers. As before, the PLC leadership team and all staff members will have access to the presenters.

The third session, a round table, will be held approximately four months after Visit, Observe, Chat. Similar to the second session visit, presenters will visit each classroom and meet with the teachers to discuss their findings. However, this visit will focus on meeting with the school building stakeholders, students, teachers, parents, and administrators to determine their needs, wants, and concerns moving forward. The Round Table sessions will allow all school community members to do more talking than in the past. The presenters will also meet with the PLC leadership to check their progress and see what aid or advice may be needed.

Session four, "What about next year?" is focused on the school defining student engagement for their demographic in connection with new research on their own and observations throughout this school year. Session four's central idea is to help the school identify the gaps in student engagement and devise a plan by meeting with students, teachers, and administrators and hearing their concerns, wants, and needs. Teachers and administrators will compile a list of concerns and possible solutions, as well as what worked and how that individual achieved it, to present and debate in small groups led by a PLC leader. The goal is to have a working list of solutions to address before the next school year and ideas from teachers to build on.

Project Evaluation

In order to evaluate the project or series, the participants will fill out an evaluation form at the end of each session. Every participant will evaluate their experience; therefore, students, parents, teachers, and administrators will be surveyed several times throughout the year. In

addition, the presenters will evaluate the project based on the increased level of student engagement witnessed throughout their visits. The evaluation link will be provided for each participant after each session through Google Form, appendix B; note that the session name will reflect the current session, and all other questions will remain the same to provide measurable results across the professional learning experience. The project's success is when the school(s) overall student engagement increases throughout the year, as observed by the teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

Project Conclusions

Student engagement is one of the top issues facing educators today. Increasing student engagement is essential to increase student learning, test scores, and overall achievement in and out of the classroom (Cole et al., 2021). However, there is no correct answer, according to experts, that will solve the lack of student engagement. Nevertheless, several theories suggest that learning is an activity a student must want to be a part of to learn (Dewey, 2009). Therefore, it is up to educators to create environments that entice students to want to be active with their education (Graffman, 2007). While none of the research presented within this project suggests a shift to flexible seating classrooms, they support a shift toward creating a unique learning environment that not only meets the behavioral needs of each student and allows for the cognitive engagement that institutions desire (Chickering & Gamson, 1998; Graffman, 2007).

This project is supported by developing educational research into flexible seating and its links to increasing student engagement. Early research indications are that there is a direct link between students using flexible seating and an increase in attention and focus, leading to higher mastery of their academic content (Strapp, 2019). According to research, using flexible seating promotes positive classroom behaviors in children and teachers, thus allowing teachers more

time to spend teaching and less disciplining students; thus, allowing students to spend more time learning and engaging in the presented materials (Strapp, 2019). In addition, one study found that if the students are comfortable in the place they are learning, they are more attentive and more likely to participate in class and the whole learning experience (Cole et al., 2021).

Research has shown that student movement can increase attention and provide an environment that allows higher-level thinking, cooperation, and student-centered learning to occur with greater ease than the traditional classroom (Attai et al., 2019). Looking for ways to increase student engagement is familiar in education; however, turning away from a 200-year-old tradition will take time. As it stands, the change to flexible seating is only occurring in about three percent of classrooms across the United States (Strapp, 2019). Research is limited and widespread support from educational entities, such as the Department of Education and school boards, needs to be improved.

The proposed professional learning experience would be the first of its kind. With the successful implementation of flexible seating, schools, teachers, parents, and students will experience increased student engagement across grade levels. The above statement has proved valid based on personal experiences over the last eleven years.

Teachers start in traditional seating; however, one teacher took it upon themselves to go against expectations. Despite administrator approval, a former high school teacher proved that flexible seating does increase student engagement by slowly integrating flexible seating. The students between 14 and 18 were more active in class discussions and completed assignments. They scored higher on state standardized tests than their counterparts in the same school who did not have access to flexible seating at any point in their day. If the experiment ended there, onlookers could argue that the findings were more a matter of teaching, curriculum,

circumstances, and student performances in other classes. However, moving schools and grade levels yielded the same results, this time with middle school students. The middle schoolers, ages 11-13, did not only thrive academically in the class with flexible seating, but there were also limited disciplinary issues, and attendance percentages were higher than in any other class across the three grade levels. The elementary experience, with students between 7-9 years old, currently taking place has found similar results. The class of third-grade students is exceeding projections and expectations. Their state standardized practice test scores are higher than projected and well above those in the other third-grade classrooms that utilize traditional seating.

While flexible seating works, as the teacher mentioned above and several research studies proved, many unanswered questions exist. Although researchers' findings are published, the educational community still debates whether flexible seating is a feasible alternative in the classroom. With anything new, it is possible that when the newest wears, the research will stop, and full implementation and credibility of flexible seating as a means to increase student engagement will decrease; as with anything, training in understanding why and how to use the tools is necessary.

Currently, no professional learning experiences/classes support and teach how and why flexible seating is necessary for classrooms; thus, teachers could use it based on preference rather than obtaining the intended results. The lack of research and experienced educators regarding flexible seating creates more questions than answers; however, implementing a professional learning course could help remove some questions from the equation.

Plans for Implementations

This project intends to start the conversation between educators, teachers, parents, students, and community members regarding the transition to flexible seating. The professional

learning experiences outlined within these pages are one teacher's professional experiences to move the stagnant classroom environment to one that is inviting and full of life, one that students and teachers want to learn and grow in.

Currently, there are yet to be plans to implement the professional learning course for several reasons. The first is due to the current lack of research in the field. The claims are valid for large-scale support only when more research studies have conclusive findings. In addition, given the current financial climate in the United States, the probable lack of support from school districts, given the financial undertaking that flexible seating involves, would be an obstacle that schools are unwilling to invest in.

However, the research field is growing, and the educational climate is shifting toward student-centered learning. The hope is that this project will become the standard classroom environment soon. Can you sit for eight hours on a hard plastic chair linked to a hard flat surface, which confines your movements? The answer is most likely no. Nevertheless, educators expect children to do what they cannot and will not do themselves. Flexible seating changes the narrative for classrooms, teachers, administrators, and, most importantly, the students.

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Appendix A

Link to PowerPoint

Click on the link below to view the presentation.



[Flipping your classroom to Increase Student Engagement.pptx](#)

Appendix B

Sample Google Evaluation Form

Click on link below to view the entire evaluation form.



<https://forms.gle/PZG3erPPV5JxodfCA>

Appendix C

Link to Media Releases

Click on the link below to view media releases.

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:b2378309-e960-3e9a-95f8-ca25b50dd667>

Created by Jacklyn Phillips, 2023

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

EDL 693 Data Form

NAME: Jacklyn Phillips

MAJOR: (Choose only 1)

Educational Leadership School Counseling
 Special Education Admin. College Student Affairs Leadership

TITLE: Defining and Increasing Student Engagement Using Flexible Seating in Elementary Classrooms

PAPER TYPE: Project

SEM/YR COMPLETED: 2023

Using key words or phrases, choose several ERIC descriptors (5 - 7 minimum) to describe the contents of your project. ERIC descriptors can be found online at <http://eric.ed.gov/?ti=all>

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Academic Learning Time | 6. Flexible seating |
| 2. Active Learning | 7. Flex classroom |
| 3. Classroom Perspectives | 8. Student Behavior |
| 4. Educational Process | 9. Student Engaged Time |
| 5. Engaged Time (Learning) | 10. Student Engagement |