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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH-STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

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Introduction

In a nationwide effort to create standardized performance criteria, there has been an emphasis on testing data as the strict measurement of teacher and student success or failure (Volante & Sonia, 2010). These testing accountability systems, developed under No Child Left Behind (2001), were based on assumptions that high-stakes assessments modeled on state standards would lead to improved academic performance and increased graduation rates. However, the emphasis on high-stakes testing is not supported by evidence as state-by-state accountability reports have noted negligible change in achievement and graduation rates in states requiring high-stakes testing for graduation (Volante & Sonia, 2010). Rather, the emphasis on testing has forced teachers to narrow the curriculum to test-taking strategies in core subject areas while simultaneously de-emphasizing the arts and other enriching subjects (e.g., Barlow, 2003) that can promote *student engagement*, defined as a connection to school in affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains (Finn, 1989).

Thus, student engagement is potentially stifled in the current education model that emphasizes high-stakes testing and accountability systems in urban schools. As decreased student engagement is related to a decreased likelihood of graduation and consequently severely limited postsecondary education and employment opportunities (National Research Council, 2004), facilitating student engagement in high-stakes environments may be key to improving student outcomes.

Fostering Student Engagement

Bryson (2014) identified the following elements in the school environment needed to facilitate engagement: (1) a connection between student and faculty, (2) meaningful academic tasks that demand student efforts in terms of time and energy, (3) collaboration with other learners, (4) a supportive learning environment (both within school and the community) that yields to the student a certain level of agency, and (5) culturally enriching activities. These components reflect a crucial emphasis on relationships, identity, time, and energy, all of which need to be present in order to enhance learning and student engagement. Bryson's five elements to facilitate student engagement are congruent with Joselowsky's (2007) framework that outlines four areas to engage youth: (1) in their own learning, (2) in the learning of others, (3) in educational opportunities, and (4) in the community. These complementary frameworks view engagement as multi-faceted and influenced by psychological and social factors as well as learning opportunities. Teachers can facilitate engagement in Joselowsky's four areas by following Bryson's recommendations for developing connections between teachers and students, as well as by providing culturally responsive and collaborative academic tasks in a supportive environment that centers students' agency.

Examples of Practice

In high-stakes systems, teachers need to go beyond the standardized curriculum to motivate students. Teacher practice to facilitate engagement recommended by Bryson and Joselowsky is exemplified by two high school teachers from an urban high school in a high-stakes accountability system. This school suffers from many ailments present in urban schools: poor attendance, high rates of free/reduced lunch, low standardized test scores, unkempt facilities, and a lack of electives centered around student interests. The first example is from Ms. R, a 2nd year high school English teacher, who looked outside her school for community resources to facilitate student involvement in their community. The second example is from Mr. M, a 10th grade English teacher, and provides a model of how teachers can facilitate student leadership and engagement through collaborative activities outside of class.

Example 1: Ms. R began teaching in a low-income school with many exhilarating ideas, which began to fall to the bottom of her

to-do list as she was overcome by the demands of being a teacher, test coach, and counselor to 150 students. Seeking to motivate students to work in class and to read independently, she realized that she would have to orchestrate opportunities that would allow students to see that their work has a connection to their community and future. She looked outside her under-resourced school to find community organizations that supported Title 1 schools, in order to fund field trips for her students. As a result of securing outside funding, the administration had little room to deny her community trip requests for her students.

Ms. R developed the theme of "Reading is Your Passport to Success." As students read, they accumulated "miles." They were able to redeem their miles by attending a quarterly field trip. Students went places such as Key West, where they explored the history of Hemingway's house, as well as the Holocaust Memorial, where they met a survivor after reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel. These trips motivated students to realize that the work they do will not only open doors for their future but also invest them in their community. Ms. R's experience demonstrates that it is possible to foster student engagement and community participation by reaching outside the system[1]. Ms. R was able to engage and motivate her students by focusing on extension activities in the community that directly follow Joselowsky's recommendation area (3) for engaging students in educational opportunities via the earned "miles" through reading. These activities provided experiences that focused on Joselowsky's area (4) for engaging students in the community, which was accomplished through the related quarterly field trips linked to the readings.

Example 2: Mr. M prompted his students to reflect on how their learning experiences in school could be improved, and they identified priority needs as receptiveness by teachers toward student interests and having learning opportunities that reflect their identities and lived realities. Mr. M shared that many of his students have skills and talents outside of English class that he was unaware of until he engaged them in dialogue regarding their interests. He stated, "Some of my students sing, some of them beatbox, some of them rap, some of them perform spoken word poetry-the list goes on. I wonder why these students are not given a platform within school for their passions and strengths in these areas?"

This was a question that became more pressing after he engaged his students in conversation about school pride (or the lack thereof in this case), and he recognized that the students displayed an enormous amount of potential despite the school's designation as "low performing." As a result of those conversations, the students organized a motivational group (Team MOTIVE: Motivating Others To Incorporate Valuable Efforts) to challenge the rest of the student body to become more engaged. His students made posters, scheduled meetings, and recruited others to coordinate creative efforts highlighting students' talents. They began designing shirts for the would-be officers of the club, and approached the administration with the Team MOTIVE student organization idea. The culminating effort was a genuine, student-led process in developing a collaborative group that sprouted from their own interests and strengths.

Mr. M shared this experience because it demonstrated how capable, willing, and creative the students could be if they were simply given the appropriate platform and support. He urges other teachers to provide this type of outside-of-class support and notes, "It is our duty as educators to provide students content knowledge, but we must also empower them. The only way to accomplish this is to provide a safe, student-led space." Mr. M's provision of the supportive, student-led space for the development of Team Motive reflects the integration in his approach of Joselowsky's recommendation areas (1) for engaging students in their own learning and (4) engaging students in the community, in this case, the school.

Recommendations for Facilitating Student Engagement

In light of the examples discussed above, two major recommendations are suggested in order to facilitate student engagement in under-resourced urban schools.

Develop an engagement framework for your own practice

The student engagement frameworks outlined by Joselowsky (2007) and Bryson (2014) provide areas for teachers to focus their efforts and explicit recommendations to engage students in their own learning and promote collaborative educational opportunities in school and the community. As Ms. R and Mr. M demonstrate, teachers can effectively facilitate these opportunities for students. Specifically, these teachers focused their efforts on Joselowlsky's recommendation areas for (1) engaging students in their own learning, (3) in a variety of educational opportunities, and (4) within the school and broader community. They were intentional in facilitating a connection between themselves and their students that moved beyond the model of "teacher as source of knowledge" to action based and experiential activities that allowed for student engagement and the co-construction of knowledge. Their efforts in supportive relationship building exemplify Bryson's first recommendation (1) to develop a connection between student and faculty in order to facilitate engagement. Further, both teachers' efforts to provide outside-of-class learning opportunities and Mr. M's facilitation of student-led experiences highlight Bryson's recommendation # 4 to facilitate a supportive learning environment that yields the student personal agency. Ms. M's field trips to local cultural centers and Mr. R's focus on supporting student's innate talents and interests both demonstrate Bryson's recommendation# 5, which emphasizes increasing student engagement through culturally enriching activities.

Consider student voice

Students, particularly adolescents, need to be heard and validated. Teachers can use this particular aspect of student behavior to their benefit for improving student engagement. Teachers must listen to students' voices and opinions in order to gain feedback about student's responsiveness to learning, courses, teachers, and school affinity. By seeking information from students, teachers both demonstrate to students that they are valued and also gain insights regarding ways to increase student engagement. Mr. M improved student engagement by listening to his students' voices as they expressed their perspectives on how to highlight students talents and strengths and then, by providing students the platform to develop their own student organization, Team MOTIVE. When teachers listen to, and most importantly, hear their student's voices, they can champion student creation and collaboration. And that is when we can begin to genuinely engage students.

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