

ABC Graffiti Reading Selection

Teaching with Poverty in Mind, p. 139 – 142

Action Steps

One of the most powerful ways to engage students is to let them take charge of their own learning. Students know their seats, their working partners, and where the learning supplies are located. They are self-regulated and come up with learning goals and problems that are meaningful to them. They manage their own time and use rubrics or checklists to manage the quality of their work. These students are more likely to find passion, excitement, and pleasure in learning. Teachers serve as coaches or facilitators, guiding students to the desired goals. Students participate in real-life activities through collaboration, exploration, and discovery with peers. Students do not walk into your class pre-assembled this way. They need encouragement, training, coaching, and support.

Find, recruit, and train the best staff you can find. To start this process, strike up a conversation at conferences with the best to discover how to attract strong teachers to your school. Ask some of the best teachers in your district what it would take to get them to teach in one of the district's most challenging schools. Some will tell you they can't handle the commute, others would need a change in colleagues, and some may even say the school needs painting. At least decide if you can change anything to attract the best.

Gather information from students. Remember, we get kids for only 30 hours a week, and we have to be dead-on to transform their lives. Administer a 10-question survey that asks students how often they feel excited, supported, and actively engaged in the learning process. If your school is not consistently engaging, you're losing your kids. Find out how often kids are bored; many staff members will need empirical evidence before they can accept that the kids they are teaching are not compelled to even participate.

Communicate the evidence and make a plan. Once you have the data, share them with the staff in a nonthreatening way. Do not say "This is how boring you are," but "This is what our kids say." The survey is just feedback, not a crucifixion. Then, consult available resources, brainstorm as a group, or solicit ideas from the most engaging teachers to develop a list of engagement strategies for each teacher to use.

Add a strategy each week and monitor progress. Engaging students means more than increasing social interactions or using more technology. In fact, highly engaging teachers tend to use a host of strategies that keep students involved nonstop in the learning process (Jensen, 2003). Most teachers can succeed if they have just one new strategy to apply each week. Let them try something out, get comfortable with it, tweak it, and make it automatic. The goal is to manage students' emotional states to make them receptive to learning as much of the time as possible. It can be done, and here's how to do it:

- Switch up social groups. Mix up the class time so that kids are only in one social grouping for 10–20 minutes at a time. Use study buddies, assigned teams, whole-class activities, or temporary ad hoc partnerships.
- Incorporate movement through learning stations, class switching, and assemblies. Class switching allows teachers who are strong in physical activities to take on another teacher's kids for a short time both to show the other teacher how to incorporate movement and to give the kids a high-energy physical break. Assemblies can incorporate energizing fan rituals like dancing or the wave.
- Ask more compelling questions; avoid unanswerable rhetorical questions. Include your entire class in your questions: instead of asking "Who saw [XYZ movie] last weekend?" ask "How many of you have seen or experienced *this* in your life?" This way, you end up including those who didn't see the movie but who share a common experience featured in the movie.
- Appreciate and acknowledge every response. When you make a habit of thanking students for putting themselves out there, you'll see more hands up in the air. Don't feel the need to evaluate everything they say. Don't say "Well, that's not entirely true." Instead, say "Thanks for jumping in. Let's grab a few more comments, then we'll debrief them all to figure out what we have here."
- Use energizers, games, drama, simulations, and other demonstration strategies.
- Keep the content alive with call-backs, hand raisers, stretching, and unfinished sentences and review questions.
- Be passionate about what you teach so that students are drawn into the emotional drama of the content.

It can be challenging to find ways to encourage disadvantaged students to embrace classrooms and a school system that historically have worked against them, but these students can still be positively surprised by what happens in their classrooms. Interaction with the physical world and with other people enables students to discover concepts and apply skills. By integrating what they have learned, students themselves become producers of knowledge, capable of making significant contributions to the world's knowledge base. What they have learned and how they learned it not only are important in their own right but also validate students' self-worth.

One important caveat: there are limits to the sheer quantity of content that students of any socioeconomic status can take in during a class period or day. Our brains allow for unlimited "priming effect" exposure, meaning we can get a superficial exposure to names, people, and events over time that gives us a notion about the content. But to process content and build in-depth understandings, students need time. Our brains may have limited vocabulary or prior knowledge. They have limited working memory and need time to recycle proteins and glucose and to consolidate new learning at the synapse and create connections. In short, engaging classes build in processing time. There are hundreds of strategies that can help students process each body of content better (Jensen & Nickelsen, 2008), but most important is this ratio: never use more than 50 percent of instructional time to deliver new content. If you give students at least half the time to process the content, they will understand and remember it longer. You can teach faster, but students will just forget faster (Alvarez & Cavanagh, 2004; Izawa, 2000; Klingberg, 2000; Todd & Marois, 2004; Wood, 2002).

The Extras

The power of the strategies discussed in this chapter is that although they are designed to build success with low-SES students, they will work well with students of all income levels. There is no need to reserve these classroom strategies for certain groups of students. They just happen to be of greater value to schools working with kids from poverty. For example, I can give vitamin supplements to 1,000 kids. For those who eat well, exercise, and manage their stress, the supplements may be of less value. But for those who don't follow that healthy routine, supplements may provide an extra boost that makes all the difference. Similarly, in the classroom, some of these strategies may not be a big deal to every single student. But to some, they make all the difference. Never, ever give up those "extras."

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. ASCD. p. 139-42. ISBN: 978-1416608844, \$26.95.