



Teacher Efficacy: Is Student Engagement Essential in Botswana Junior Secondary Schools?

Waitshega Tefo Smitta Moalosi¹
Department of Educational Foundations
Faculty of Education,
University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana

Abstract

This paper discusses student engagement in learning in junior secondary school classes. Concern has been raised on the declining performance of students in junior secondary schools. The 2009 junior certificate results are a testimony to this concern. This paper investigates the response of Botswana junior secondary school teachers on three subscales: the Teacher Sense of Self Efficacy scale (TSES), efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies and classroom management. The findings of this study suggest that teachers do not fully engage students in learning activities. Data was collected using a survey instrument administered to 1006 participants. Based on this study, decline in student performance can be linked to teachers failing to fully engage students in learning. Recommendations on how to engage students in learning are offered.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Classroom Management, Instructional Strategies, Teachers' Sense of Efficacy, Teacher Efficacy, Instructional Self-Efficacy.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the classroom, student engagement is defined as the ability to encourage students to learn (Harlin, Roberts, Briers, Mowen, and Edgar 2007). Students who are supported in their learning will be motivated to learn and accomplish more at school and their performance will improve. Teachers who encourage students to learn are perceived as having strong teaching efficacy beliefs – they believe in their abilities to produce desired student learning (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy & Woolfolk, 2001).

Wolters and Daugherty (2007) report that teachers' sense of efficacy "was best conceptualized as three related dimensions reflecting teachers' sense of efficacy for instruction, management and engagement" (p. 190). A teacher's sense of efficacy around student engagement is also related to an individual's conviction that he/she assists students to "become and remain involved, invested or motivated for learning" (Wolters and Daugherty p.182). They found that teachers with efficacious beliefs are those that tend to be interested in facilitating learning and believe that the students ought to be involved and motivated in the learning environments. Interestingly, a more recent study by Dibapile (2011) found that efficacy in student engagement was related to teachers holding Post Graduate Diplomas in Education. These teachers rated themselves higher in terms of student engagement than did their colleagues with other qualifications.

Students who are not engaged and not interested in learning are easily discouraged and may decide to abandon their studies, jeopardizing their own future and that of their community and nation. Research emphasizes the importance of motivation when engaging students in learning tasks. For teachers, the ability to motivate students involves “knowing what kinds of tasks support and feedback encourage students to put forth effort and strive to improve” (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2006, p.8).

Given our general knowledge of the role of teachers and teaching in encouraging and sustaining student engagement, one may be left to wonder why are junior and senior secondary school students still struggling with this dimension of learning? Likewise, how has concern about this issue spread so fast as to be echoed by both Botswana’s President and the community at large? This paper will explore a number of the classroom issues affecting student engagement and teacher efficacy in fostering student engagement and hence, successful learning.

Categories of Student Engagement

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, (2004) classified forty-four studies of engagement into three categories: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. For them, “behavioral engagement encompasses doing work, and following the rules; emotional engagement includes interest, values, and emotions; and cognitive engagement incorporates motivation, effort and strategy use” (p. 65). These categories are helpful in understanding student engagement.

Learning requires students to take responsibility for their work (a student-centered approach) rather than looking to teachers to drive the learning process. We still do not know in Botswana if students are self-engaged in learning or if it is the teachers who are controlling in the learning settings. Addressing teachers at a 2012 workshop in Maun, the North West District of Botswana, Chief Officer Mr. Maseko advocated for approaches like Pupil Academic Empowerment Strategies (PAES) that motivate learners and diminish the teacher’s role as the director in learning. Such teaching strategies are useful as they encourage students to take responsibility for their learning rather than relying on the teacher to lead the learning process.

Student Engagement and Teacher Efficacy

Student engagement is associated with teacher efficacy, and research has clearly found that teacher efficacy has an impact on teacher “performance, commitment, and professional retention” (Ware & Kitsantas, p. 303). Self-efficacious teachers are viewed as having the ability to organize relevant activities and to show patience with students who are struggling. Thus these “teachers will exhibit good performance and probably remain committed to their work” (p. 303).

Cousins and Walker (as cited in Fives and Buehl, 2010) found that teachers with high self-efficacy are likely to perform better than those with low self-efficacy because they “implement didactic innovations in the classroom and use classroom management approaches and adequate teaching methods that encourage students’ autonomy and reduce custodial control” (p. 252). Likewise, according to Erawan (2010), teachers with high self-efficacy keep students on task

Schunk (2012) defines teacher self-efficacy as instructional self-efficacy, referring to personal beliefs about one’s capacity to help students learn (p.153). Accordingly, instructional self-efficacy influences a teacher’s activities, effort, and persistence with students (Ashton & Webb, 1986). This notion of self-efficacy implies that for students to learn effectively, teachers must believe in their own abilities to enhance learning. Teachers with low self-efficacy may not be motivated to plan or prepare their teaching materials effectively (Henson, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teacher efficacy is vital to what is described as intentional teaching (Slavin, 2006). A teacher who comes to the classroom and prepares lessons with intention is much more likely to positively impact student engagement and learning than one who sees his or her position as simply a job to be endured. Effective teachers thus teach not only to earn a salary, but to develop students’ learning. In the context of teacher efficacy research, teacher self-efficacy is thus perceived to be a “predictor of student achievement” (p.153).

Rizvi and Elliot (2005) in analyzing data from Karachi teachers in Pakistan public primary schools reported various “dimensions of teacher efficacy, teacher practice, teacher collaboration, and teacher leadership (p. 46). This and other research confirms that “when teachers are highly efficacious, their students are found to have a high level of academic achievement, autonomy and motivation, and a firm belief in their own efficacy” (Cheung, 2008, p. 104). Teachers with a high teacher efficacy are also ambitious in their work and comfortable with new ideas. They show

patience, when facing challenging situations because they are influenced by their desire to see students with all abilities succeed.

It remains the practice of some teachers punish students when they make errors, using corporal or other means of punishment. This type of student punishment contradicts the findings of most teacher efficacy research. Ashton and Webb (1986) have suggested that these teachers' beliefs were often linked to strict punishment procedures, such as abusing students physically and verbally, and sending students out of the classroom. Highly efficacious teachers criticize their students' errors less, devote extra time to assisting struggling students, and continue to show interest in all students' education (Ho & Hau, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teachers with a high teacher efficacy are also proactively perceptive in terms of students' needs in the learning environment (Cheung, 2008). Highly efficacious teachers engage students in learning while using various instructional methods to control undesirable classroom behavior. Woolfolk Hoy, Rosoff, and Hoy (1990) added, "A sense of personal efficacy becomes related to beliefs about control only after some years of actual experience in classrooms" (p.146).

Kounin's Research

The research of Kounin (in Brophy, 2006) is discussed below as it relates to student engagement. This paper contends that if teachers in Botswana were to adopt the research findings of Kounin, students would become more engaged in learning and low academic performances would be reduced. Kounin identified a number of teacher efficacy variables by analyzing video tapes of classrooms:

- *Withitness*: "Remaining with it," teachers stayed on top of what was happening in the classroom and continued to assess the overall classroom environment while engaged with individual students or small groups.
- *Overlapping*: Teachers performed more than one task at a time. For example, they remained close to students or looked at them to capture their attention, which allowed them to conduct the lesson without disruption.
- *Signal continuity and momentum during the lesson*: The teacher teaches well-planned, efficient classes centered on capturing student attention. The teacher should also present content continually and that is more compelling than the noise of competing distractions (p. 760).
- *Group alertness and accountability during lessons*: Teachers used question strategies that maintained group attention and their sense of responsibility for learning. Such strategies included pausing before asking an individual to respond to a question, refraining from guessing when selecting participants, and "interspersing choral responses with individual responses" (Brophy, 2006, p. 760).
- *Challenge and variety in assignments*: Students can be encouraged by and engaged in "seatwork" by being offered a diversity of assignments to challenge their cognitive abilities (Brophy, 2006).
- *Conveying purposefulness*: Teachers who were efficient classroom managers took advantage of the time allotted for teaching and evaluated whether the students were participating and learning. They encouraged students to be responsible for finishing their work on time. Daily revision of work was arranged, and students were given effective evaluations (Brophy, 2006).
- *Teaching appropriate conduct*: Effective classroom managers were viewed as having and communicating an understanding of what they expected from students as well as what they would not accept. They concentrated on the work students should be doing, which was important, and on teaching them how to do their work (Brophy, 2006).
- *Maintaining attention*: Effective classroom managers quickly identified students who were confused or not paying attention in class. They also organized seating arrangements so that students faced the direction in which they could best concentrate. In addition, effective managers changed the tone of their voices

when they spoke with students and moved around the class or “pace[d] to sustain attention” (Brophy, 2006).

Effective classroom managers also followed up on demanding tasks in the first weeks of class, encouraging and supporting students as needed. According to Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson (as cited in Brophy, 2006) effective managers “continued to give reminders and occasional remedial instruction, and they remained consistent in enforcing their rules” (p. 760). Effective managers instructed their students to abide by rules and procedures; talked about their expectations regarding student accountability, engagement, and quality of work; and clearly posted tasks and due dates.

This paper asserts that should the above research findings be applied in classrooms in Botswana and teachers can be motivated to teach in a more intentional way, students will begin to assume more responsibility for their own learning and learning environments, thereby improving their academic performances. For Daugherty, (2005) efficacy around student engagement was a significant predictor of a teacher adequately engaging the struggling learner, motivating students, and pursuing effective instruction and assessment. It is unclear if struggling students in Botswana are truly engaged in learning or if they are left to struggle further and thus grow increasingly isolated from the education system and its goals.

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Teaching Salaries and Union-Government Disputes

This section discusses several factors that can influence Botswana teachers and hinder their efforts to engage students in learning. These factors were identified during the collection of data for this study. One of the most significant factors affecting teacher efficacy (and hence student engagement) was the chronically low salaries paid to teachers. Beginning in September 2010, education and public service unions had advised their members to reduce the workload in response to the government’s unwillingness to increase salaries. On this matter, the Secretary General of the Botswana Federation of Public Sector Unions (BOFEPUSO), to which teachers unions subscribe, wrote, “We strongly advise members only to work as per the normal hours of work for government employees, effective September, 2010, unless advised by the union leadership” (Gazette, 2010, p. 2).

At the time of data collection, disputes between teachers and the government regarding certain work-related duties were ongoing and teachers tended to comply with the advice of union leaders rather than the requirements of their employers. For many teachers this meant finishing work in the afternoon, at half past four, which is the end of the business day for government employees. Previously, teachers provided extracurricular activities to students, like sports and music, after class hours. Teachers also refused to invigilate the national examinations that junior secondary school students were required to write at the end of the year. As a result, principal educators and other professionals hired by the government invigilated the examinations.

One of the concerns in this regard is how long it will take teachers to regain their efficacy and whether the added stress of the dispute will prevent them from effectively engaging students in learning. Evans and Ingersoll (as cited in Klassen and Chiu, 2010) found that “teachers who are dissatisfied with their work display less commitment and are at greater risk for leaving the profession” (p. 742). If teachers in Botswana continue to carry with them a series of unresolved work-related issues, maintaining efficacy, engaging students, managing classes and using effective instructional strategies will not be easy.

Class Size

Class size is another factor that can affect student engagement and performance. Over-attended classes can hinder learning by interfering with curriculum goals and making it difficult for teachers to interact regularly students. Botswana junior secondary school classrooms are crowded. According to Botswana education statistics, at primary and secondary schools, the teacher-student ratio should be 1:28 and 1:40, respectively (Education Statistics, 2004). Most classrooms in Botswana were designed to accommodate 35 students, but class enrollment frequently exceeds that number. In such situations, even if teachers have a high efficacy and intend to employ various teaching methods to engage students in learning, they are bound to be less successful.

Overcrowded classrooms in Botswana are not a new problem. Reporting the benefits of a smaller class enrollment, the 1993 Report of the National Commission on Education noted that in smaller classes, “the teacher is

able to give individual attention to the child; to give more work and mark it; to get to know the strengths and weakness of children better and therefore devise appropriate remedial measures and more effectively monitor progress of children in class” (p. 122). Despite this early observation, classes today remain overcrowded. This overcrowding calls into question the ability of Botswana to achieve its Vision 2016 goal of being an educated and informed nation given the further caveat that “education must focus on the development of the individual’s potentialities to the fullest extent, across life-span” (p.37).

CONCLUSION

The premise of this paper is not to suggest that all teachers in primary, junior and secondary schools in Botswana fail to engage students in learning. There are teachers and schools that are performing well and have a good history of academic achievement. This paper does suggest, however, that the general decline in academic performance being observed across the nation is, in many ways, related to student engagement.

It is important to note as well, that this paper does not presume that learning begins and ends in the classroom. It is equally important that parents play an active role in engaging and encouraging their children to learn and achieve. In Botswana parents are increasingly criticized for not taking more ownership of the education and education outcomes of their children. As offered by the Minister of Education “parents should take responsibility for education of their children by monitoring and guiding them at home” (Bothoko, 2012). The Assistant Minister of Education has likewise expressed concern over this lack of interest. Parents “are not involved in their children’s learning and do not attend PTA meetings”. The Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Botswana has expressed similar views: “parents are equally to blame for poor results because they put very limited effort in ensuring that their children perform to the best of their abilities at school”. Research and reports evidence have found that parental or guardians’ involvement leads to the following:

- Enhanced academic performance
- Better to classroom behavior
- Decreased student drug and alcohol abuse
- Increased teacher moral
- Improved parent-child relationships (Columbus High School Parent/Guardian Involvement Plan, 2012).

The above findings on parental involvement are vital and undoubtedly have a role to play in student academic performance. The increased involvement of parents is also likely to lead to increased motivation among teachers as teachers will feel as though their classroom efforts are being acknowledged and reinforced by parents at home. Parents must begin to recognize themselves as a critical piece of the learning environment and to understand that teachers alone cannot accomplish the important job of engaging students. Learning is a collaborative activity whereby teachers and parents much work together to help the learner to succeed.

This paper has contended that students will be more successful in their educational pursuits if they are engaged in the learning process and take responsibility for some of their own learning. Teachers play an important role in making sure that students are focused in their learning activities. The research of Kounin has articulated the ways in which teachers can help students to become task-focused. The research of Daugherty (2005) has highlighted the importance of teachers providing extra guidance and supports to low performing students rather than neglecting their engagement altogether to continue to work with high performing students.

For both high and low performing students, motivating students can help them to persist during learning and when learning obstacles are encountered. The centrality of student assessment to engaged learning cannot be underemphasized as this is where student strengths and weaknesses are identified, thereafter allowing teachers to employ different/tailored strategies to help all students to succeed.

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ⁱ Dr. Waitshenga Tefo Smitta Moalosi is a lecturer at the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Botswana. She teaches courses in Educational Psychology. Dr. Moalosi holds the following qualifications: Diploma in Counseling Studies, Keele University, and (England). Bsc Psychology, Bolton Institute of Higher Education (England). M.ED Psychology of Education, Bristol University, (England) and PhD in Educational Psychology and Research (University of Tennessee, Knoxville (USA). Smitta's research interests are: Teacher efficacy, classroom management, reasons for choosing teaching as a career, self- concept and adolescent development. He can be reached via Email: smitta.moalosi@ub.bw, smittawd@yahoo.com.