

Judy R. Jablon and Michael Wilkinson

Using Engagement Strategies to Facilitate Children's Learning and Success

The third-graders in Ms. Neil's classroom begin a lesson on dictionaries with a whole-group discussion about what the children already know about the purpose and organization of these resources. Ms. Neil then explains to the children that they will work in small groups to examine the dictionary carefully; make observations about the book's organization, structure, and format; and record their group's findings on a chart. After ensuring that everyone is clear about the task, she posts a chart showing six teams of four children and sends them off with a task sheet to begin work.

The teams disperse to get the necessary materials: chart paper, dictionaries, and a basket with markers, pencils, and sticky notes. A few minutes later, a buzz of activity and conversation fills the room as all six teams pore over dictionary pages, discuss their observations, collaborate, and debate how to keep track of the information on their charts. Ms. Neil circulates around the room talking with each group, posing questions to promote thinking, responding to children's questions, and noting to individual children what she observes about their work. Within the groups, laughter is interspersed with argument as children comment on humorous or unfamiliar words, multiple meanings, and unusual punctuation. Twenty minutes into the work period, the six charts are filling up with lots of information.

PICTURE YOUR CLASSROOM. Are there moments like this one when children are fully involved, curious about finding answers to real questions, taking initiative, enthusiastic? The room hums with positive energy and children are deeply engaged in their learning. You step back with a deep sense of satisfaction and think, "Wow! They are working well together. I wish it were always like this." You recognize that the children are a community of learners.

In this article we define what engagement is and why it is important to children's success as learners. We offer strategies for facilitating children's engagement in learning and provide some tips for implementing them.

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Defining engagement

Children begin life eager to explore the world around them. Watching a baby fascinated by the hands she has just discovered as hers or a toddler as he carefully lifts a shovel full of sand, spills it into the colander, then watches, eyes wide open, as the sand flows through the tiny holes—for the fifth time—is seeing engagement at its best!

Research about engagement in the classroom describes both psychological and behavioral characteristics (Finn & Rock 1997; Brewster & Fager 2000; Marks 2000). Psychologically, engaged learners are intrinsically motivated by curiosity, interest, and enjoyment, and are likely to want to achieve their own intellectual or personal goals. In addition, the engaged child demonstrates the behaviors of concentration, investment, enthusiasm, and effort.

In the opening example the children demonstrate engagement through their curiosity, effort, and persistence. They can be described as busy and on task. But they are also using their minds, hearts, and even their bodies to learn. In his book *Shaking Up the School House*, Schlechty captures the difference between being engaged and being on task:

Engagement is active. It requires that students be attentive as well as in attendance; it requires the student to be committed to the task and find some inherent value in what he or she is being asked to do. The engaged student not only does the task assigned but also does it with enthusiasm and diligence. Moreover, the student performs the task because he or she perceives the task to be associated with a near-term end that he or she values. (2001, 64)

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What does research tell us about engagement in the classroom?

Not surprisingly, research shows a significant correlation between high levels of engagement and improved attendance and achievement as measured through direct observations and interviews with and questionnaires to children and teachers (Finn & Rock 1997; Marks 2000; Roderick & Engle 2001; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis 2002). After children enter school, their natural motivation and interest in learning do not always persist. Research also tells us that disengagement increases as children progress from elementary to middle to high school (Graham & Weiner 1996; Felner et al. 1997; Brewster & Fager 2000). Children may lose interest in classroom activities, respond poorly to teacher direction and classroom interaction, and perform significantly lower on tests. Studies have shown that patterns of educational disengagement begin as early as third grade (Rossi & Montgomery 1994).

As important as engagement is for children's success as learners, strategies for promoting engagement are not emphasized or even present in the vast majority of school settings (Marks 2000; McDermott, Mordell, & Stolfus 2001). Instruction that promotes passivity, rote learning, and routine tends to be the rule rather than the exception

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(Yair 2000; Goodlad 2004). Because children with low levels of engagement are at risk for

disruptive behavior, absenteeism, and eventually dropping out of school (Roderick & Engle 2001), the need to increase engagement is critical to children's success in school.

Engaging children in the classroom

Educators of young children tend to share the goal of fostering children's successful learning and achievement.

As the pressure to emphasize academic standards increases, it is all the more essential to reflect on the most effective practices for ensuring that children are actually learning what is being taught. Some factors related to children's achievement are not in teachers' control, but creating a climate of engagement in the classroom is. The use of engagement strategies is a powerful teaching tool critical in promoting children's achievement because it

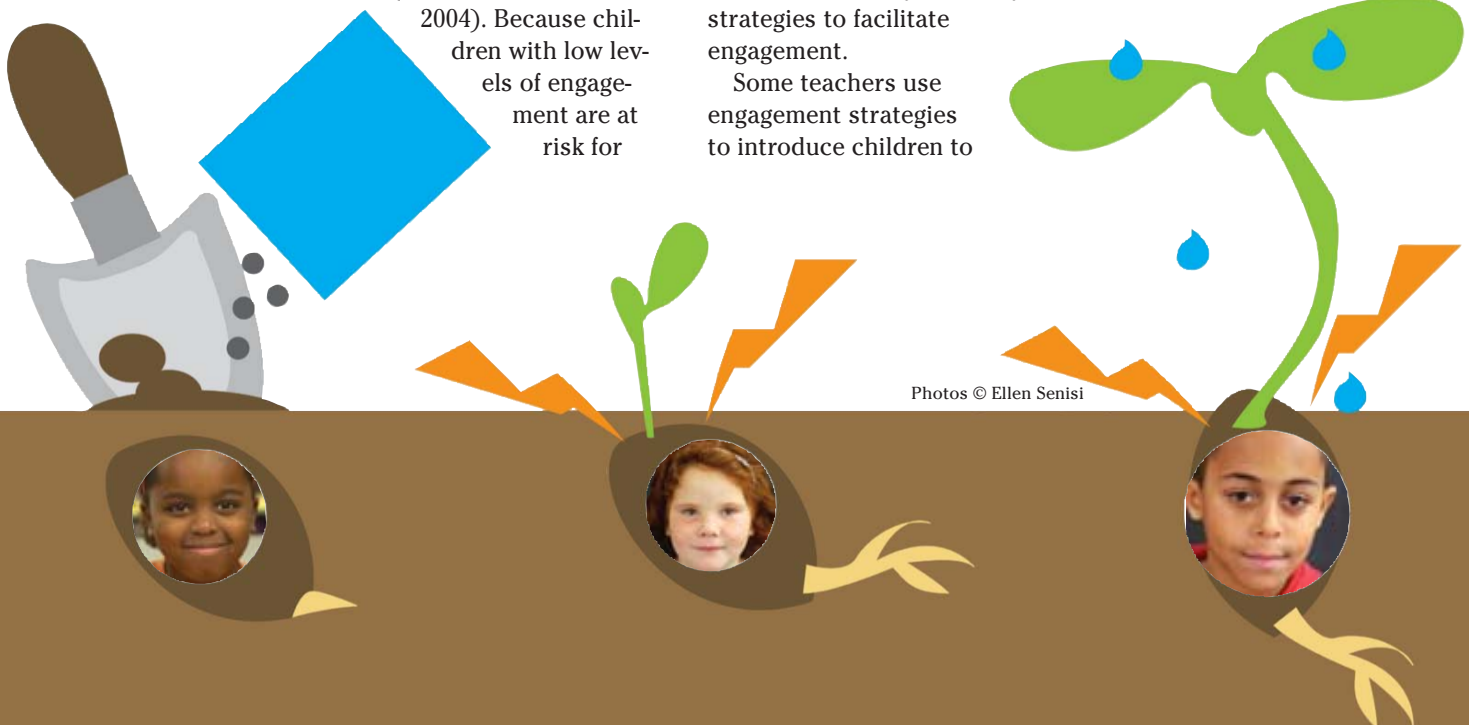
- focuses children on learning;
- supports learning specific skills and concepts; and
- provides children positive associations with learning.

The authors' experiences observing in classrooms and talking with teachers show that many teachers use strategies throughout the day to engage children in learning. In a recent conversation with a group of K-3 teachers, one teacher remarked, "I care a lot about engaging my kids. But

it just comes naturally to me. I'm not sure I actually use strategies." Another teacher added, "It's just part of the culture of my classroom." These teachers work hard to foster positive relationships with children and create a learning community. But the more we talked, they gradually began to analyze the little things they do and concluded collectively that they do use strategies to facilitate engagement.

Some teachers use engagement strategies to introduce children to

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new ideas or bring a topic of study to conclusion. Others use them to keep children focused, energize the group, manage behavior, and avoid chaos during transitions. Engagement strategies can be used for different purposes and in different settings.

Below are some engagement strategies for use with whole groups, small groups, and individual learners:

KWL—To begin a new study or theme, teachers ask children, “What do you already *know*, what do you *wonder* about, and what do you want to *learn*?” Use of this strategy tells children that their prior knowledge and interests are valued.

How many ways can you do this?—

Teachers pose this question or organize an activity with this as the opener in various situations. For example, how many ways can you create shapes on a geoboard? or how many ways can you sort bottle caps? As soon as you ask children to come up with many different ways to use a material, answer a question, or end a story, their desire to make choices and be inventive comes into play and leads to engagement.

Think, pair, share—This strategy works well at group time to ensure that each child has an opportunity to respond to questions. After posing a question, the teacher tells children to take a moment to think of an answer and then turn to a partner to talk. After everyone has had a chance to talk with their partners, volunteers share a few ideas with the whole group.

Dramatic touch—Teachers can use drama and humor to enhance child interest. For example,



Characteristics of Engaging Experiences

- activate prior knowledge
- foster active investigation
- promote group interaction
- encourage collaboration
- allow for choice
- include games and humor
- support mastery
- nurture independent thinking
- do not make children wait

to encourage children to use other words for *said* in their writing, a teacher darkened the room, lit a flashlight, and attached a card with the word *said* written on it to a make-believe tombstone. Then the class brainstormed other words they could use.

See what you can find out—The primary purpose of this approach is to introduce children to a new topic, material, book, or tool. Ms. Neil used it to encourage children to further explore a valuable resource tool.

Quick games—Twenty Questions, I’m Thinking of a Number, and other games that capture children’s interest can be applied to different subject areas and often work especially well to keep children engaged during transition times.

Understanding why engagement strategies work

Think back to the story of Ms. Neil’s classroom at the beginning of the article. Amidst an atmosphere of energy, enthusiasm, and productivity, the children are actively acquiring and applying skills related to using a dictionary. They are purposeful while investigating how to understand and use an important reference tool. They are researchers working in teams to discover, share, and organize



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Using this strategy gives children greater responsibility for their learning, a prerequisite for high achievement.

As stated earlier, research tells us that teacher awareness and the use of engagement strategies benefit children tremendously. Their interest in learning and their confidence as learners will increase, and hopefully those children who are engaged learners in the early grades will bring this characteristic with them as they continue in school. What's more, teachers tell us that they themselves are energized by the children's increased enthusiasm and success.

information. Ms. Neil carefully selected the engagement strategy See What You Can Find Out because it addresses the purposes of her lesson:

- **to expose children to new information**—Ms. Neil is teaching how to learn about and use reference materials. She also addresses a third grade state literacy standard: determine the meanings and other features of words (for example, pronunciation, syllabication, synonyms, parts of speech) using the dictionary and thesaurus (and CD-ROM and Internet when available).
- **to promote excitement through discovery**—In this lesson Ms. Neil exposes children to all that the dictionary offers as a research tool.

See What You Can Find Out engages children because it includes instructional methods that fit well with how children learn. This approach

- **activates prior knowledge**—Children answer “What do you already know about [in our example, the dictionary]?”
- **requires active investigation**—Children answer “What can you find out about _____?”
- **encourages collaboration**—Children work in teams of four, divide responsibilities, and share information and knowledge with peers.
- **allows choice**—Children determine how to go about the task, what information they will gather, and how to record it on their chart.

When Ms. Neil uses the See What You Can Find Out strategy to encourage children to explore the dictionary, she facilitates the lesson by providing

Facilitating engagement strategies

The engagement strategies you choose depend on your purpose, teaching style, and the children in your classroom. Regardless of the strategies selected, effective facilitation is a key to making them work. By facilitation we mean the techniques used to execute a strategy.

When Ms. Neil uses the See What You Can Find Out strategy to encourage children to explore the dictionary, she facilitates the lesson by providing

- **a clearly stated purpose**—She lets children know the overall purpose of the task and why they are being asked to do it: they are researchers finding out about how to use a powerful tool.
- **explicit directions**—Ms. Neil provides directions about the what and how of the task at each step, both verbally and in writing.
- **needed materials**—Children have dictionaries, chart paper, and baskets with pencils, markers, and sticky notes.
- **guidance**—Ms. Neil circulates among groups, asking and answering questions as well as giving feedback.



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Conclusion

Ideally, teachers should use a wide range of engagement strategies and then masterfully facilitate their implementation. Not only do engagement strategies enable teachers to capture the interest of children as they learn the skills and concepts necessary for success in school, but children also experience what it feels like to be engaged in learning—a lifelong gift.

Share your great ideas . . .

The authors are writing a book with the working title "The Power of Engagement: Facilitating Student Interest and Achievement." It will be a compendium of successful engagement strategies for early childhood and elementary teachers. They want to hear about engagement strategies you use in your classroom so they can share them with other teachers. Please visit the Web site, www.engagingstudents.com, to share your successful strategies and to read other examples.

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