



Research Brief

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The Impact of Teacher Engagement on Student Trauma

StrivePartnership.org

One West Fourth Street, Suite 200
Cincinnati, OH 45202-3634

1. INTRODUCTION

Research continues to confirm with great clarity what many parents and community leaders have been saying for years about students who grow up in challenging economic and social environments: Their learning potential is often impeded by the circumstances they must navigate each day. It is tempting, then, to ascribe the prospects for these students' academic success to simply addressing conditions outside the classroom. In fact, teachers have tremendous capacity to empower these students to be successful in spite of their challenges. It requires teachers to gain a deeper understanding of how out-of-classroom events affect student learning, and to recognize how teachers' attitudes and perspectives of students burdened by these challenges determine how well they will engage in the classroom and, as a result, learn.

The aim of this research brief is to highlight current research on out-of-classroom challenges on student learning, the positive impact of programs that effectively address these challenges, and the capacity of teachers to create an environment for academic success.

2. OUT OF CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

Students face varying levels of exposure risk to traumatic events in their lives that can disrupt a student's learning and growth trajectory. These factors can range from a child's perception of parental stress negatively impacts academic performance¹ to the way a child's exposure to neighborhood violence negative effects both attention span and impulse control². While parents and caregivers work to provide their children with a quality education as a means to a better future, structural factors such as generational poverty and systemic racism create barriers that can make doing so exponentially more difficult.

Research shows that as a result, evenly distributing high-quality learning opportunities across a student population disproportionately benefits more advantaged students³. Further, schools and classrooms with high concentrations of students from households that have poor economic means see lower academic achievement, slower rates of academic progress, less time on task in the classroom, and higher rates of behavioral disruption⁴. Thus, it is critical for teachers to understand how traumatic stresses shape student engagement and behavior in the classroom.

¹ (Soltis, Davidson, Moreland, Felton, and Dumas 2013)

² (Sharkey, Tirado-Strayer, Papachristos and Raver 2012)

³ (Hanselman 2018)

⁴ (Lagencamp and Carbonaro 2018)

3. EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that are well-designed and expertly implemented have shown positive social-emotional and behavioral outcomes, as well as an 11 percentile gain in academic outcomes⁵. This has come due to significant advances in understanding child development and best practices of implementing this knowledge into classrooms. SEL focuses on the development of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. They promote self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills⁶. Aggregate gains in social-emotional skills yield positive effects on classroom academic progress, time on task, and fewer behavioral disruptions. Research has found that improvements in the social process, emotional support and organization of the classroom have a positive effect on math achievement scores⁷.

A meta-analysis of 213 school based, social-emotional learning programs shows effective programs engage SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) practices to yield the full benefits of social-emotional learning⁵. These programs use a step-by-step sequenced training approach, engage students in active learning, sufficiently focus enough time on skill development, and have explicitly stated learning goals. SAFE practices are suggested to be used together and in a comprehensive way due to skills building upon one another rather than in a piece-mail or ad hoc fashion.

Reflexivity while experiencing implementation problems is a moderating variable as to whether a school experiences positive student outcomes. Thus, for a program to be beneficial it must be both well-designed and implemented. The implementation side, as it relates to curriculum consistency, was identified recently as a problem of practice during a math curriculum review that Student Achievement Partners conducted for Cincinnati Public Schools. Consequently, the district is using Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practices to address the issue and ensure that classrooms continue to meet the needs of an ever-changing student population. CQI also will facilitate utilization and innovation of best practices across all CPS schools. Staff and teacher buy-in must be present in the planning stage and sustained through the implementation stages for SEL to be effective.

⁵ (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger 2011)

⁶ (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2005)

⁷ (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, and McClowry 2015)

4. TEACHER IMPACT

Teachers are more often encouraged to focus on content rather than grapple with why students are not fully engaged in the learning process⁸. Improving student engagement in school requires educators to be constantly reflective about their own practice, and how they are influencing student engagement. Many students show weak engagement in school and research shows engagement as highly consequential to academic success. Obviously, teachers cannot control the factors outside the classroom in a student's home and neighborhood life that influence engagement. What they can control is whether the classroom is a safe social space that is engaging for all students and how it is affected by their own behaviors, beliefs, and positionality in relation to their students.

Research suggests staff members' beliefs about student capacity for behavioral change and management are of great importance to improve student outcomes⁹. Through a culturally responsive instructional framework, teachers must reflect on their own positionality and teaching practice through the eyes of their students. Instruction must build on current knowledge, skills, and interest to bridge new course materials. Teachers must meet students where they are and leverage the cultural and personal assets of students through an empowerment lens rather than a deficit perspective¹⁰. Interventions must be culturally and contextually appropriate for the student and wider student community if they are to be effective¹¹.

The ways that educators interpret and respond to students' behavior influences students' subsequent engagement. Teachers' responses to students can exacerbate or alleviate student stress and trauma. Differential interpretation of student behaviors by race results in students of color being subject to disproportionate disciplinary actions by both number and magnitude¹². This can negatively change a student's academic identity and how they perceive adults in schools¹³. Research shows that African American students are more likely to experience disciplinary action and the kinds of disciplinary actions taken are more punitive¹⁴. In fact, repeated out-of-school suspensions have been found to account for half of the association between childhood suspension and juvenile arrest¹⁵

⁸ (Allensworth, Farrington, Gordon, Johnson, Klein, McDaniel, and Nagaoka 2018)

⁹ (Anyon, Nicotera, and Veeh 2016)

¹⁰ (Gay 2018)

¹¹ (Morgan, Hsiao, Dobbins, Brown, and Lyons 2015)

¹² (Gregory and Fergus 2017)

¹³ (Pyne 2019)

¹⁴ (Gopalan and Nelson 2019)

¹⁵ (Mittleman 2018)

5. CONCLUSION

Schools can't be a cure all for larger social ills that effect families and students. However, schools can control how they engage best practices that have shown positive results in mitigating the effects of the social and economic challenges children face outside the classroom that influence what happens inside the classroom. In fact, the way teachers engage students can either exacerbate or alleviate student trauma.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey Gaver is a Research Intern at StrivePartnership. He is currently a PhD student studying Sociology at the University of Cincinnati.