



# Improving Behaviour Through Engagement in Learning



*Elizabeth Scott argues for managing behaviour by engaging students in their learning...*

Often, as teachers, we focus on behaviour strategies to improve student engagement and achievement. What would it look like if we flipped this relationship around? This article suggests ten strategies that have been successful for improving student behaviour in low-socio-economic settings, along with a list of online references which could be considered for use by teachers across all contexts and stages of their career.

## Establish clear roles

In the classroom it should be clear that students are there for learning and teachers are there for teaching. Develop explicit routines to facilitate smooth transitions, structures and behaviour expectations. Promote socially acceptable behaviours such as co-operation, self-control and being productively engaged in learning tasks. Set high expectations that are consistent and appropriate. Explicitly teach students social skills, and how to express ideas and opinions respectfully during dialogue. Ensure that there are enough resources and that students can access them in a socially acceptable manner.

## Be proactive

Make informed choices about the use of structure, routine, instruction and discipline in order to facilitate engagement and learning. Acknowledge that there are usually explanations when students experience difficulties (for example, social or learning needs) and look for solutions, not excuses, for lack of success. Actively promote and model a can-do, no-excuses attitude towards learning. Be aware of what is occurring in all parts of the classroom by moving around the classroom while students are working and intervene early and quickly to deal with disengagement and any inappropriate behaviour choices. Consistently expect high standards of behaviour for all and explain that all students have the right to learn and teachers have the right to establish optimal learning environments.

## Know your content

Be familiar with syllabus documents and support materials to be confident, credible and engaging. If you know the content you are teaching well, you will be better positioned to plan explicit, systematic units of work and lessons.

## Be prepared

Plan ahead and make good use of your release from face-to-face teaching time. Be familiar with readily available, relevant and engaging resources such as the school library and stage-appropriate websites, such as [ABC Education](#). Make sure you have enough equipment in the classroom (including scissors, glue sticks and so on) so that students can get on with their learning tasks without delay. Check that technology



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is working and fit for the intended purpose, and have a back-up plan as well as a plan for those students who are “fast finishers”; this might be an independent, engaging task to go on with that does not require too much time spent on explanation.

## What is the hook?

Think about how you are going to generate interest and engagement in each and every lesson. It could be by using a quality picture book, a video clip, playing a game or telling a story. Discussions could begin with making connections to previous learning, prior experiences or student interests, as well as establishing relevance as to how students will use this learning in real life.

## Facilitate meaningful dialogue

Ask thoughtful questions that require higher cognitive demands, for example, open ended or inferential, and provide sufficient wait time (usually at least three seconds) to improve the number and quality of responses from a range of students in your class. Plan for how you will provide regular opportunities and time for students to engage in real discussion, rather than question and response, and share their thoughts and opinions using strategies such as “think, pair, share” (teacher asks a question, allows think time, then students pair up and discuss possible answers before sharing with the class) and “opinion lines” (students stand along a line to demonstrate the relative degree of agreement or disagreement they have with a statement). Generally, engagement lifts as students become more accountable, active learners, and this also promotes positive peer relationships and opportunities to hear from someone other than the teacher.

## Provide feedback

Good feedback helps students take control of their learning and should focus on improving tasks, improving processes or improving self-regulation. Feedback needs to be clear, positive and timely, and is most effective if it is part the learning dialogue and offers clear suggestions for improvement that are aligned with expectations and learning intentions. If it is timely, for example after a first attempt or a first draft and before task completion, students can receive and act upon the feedback and be more engaged and in control in their learning.

## Monitor engagement levels

Notice disengagement and respond before undesirable behaviour choices escalate. You might need to restate instructions, cut an activity short, introduce a quick “brain break”, revise previous learning or modify an activity (for instance, bring the group together to make a task more teacher guided rather than independent for a period).

## Get up and move

Include different classroom spaces in your lessons rather than sitting quietly for long periods of time. A long period of time in primary might be 15 minutes for K-2 and 20 to 30 minutes for Years 3-6. Be creative with ways to include movement and student interaction into lessons. For example, seat students near the whiteboard for brainstorming, rotate students through tasks set up at workstations around the room, split into pairs or small groups and utilise different spaces within the classroom for discussion, move to a designated corner to show an opinion (for example strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) or along a line to indicate their view on an issue as part of meaningful dialogue.

## Plan for and implement explicit vocabulary instruction

Vocabulary knowledge will deepen students' engagement in reading, writing, speaking and listening in all subject areas. Explicitly teach the academic words that are used commonly across curriculum areas but are less likely to be used in everyday talk (such as scrutinise, survey). Students also need to be explicitly taught the more subject specific words that are more limited to very specific curriculum areas (for example, photosynthesis in Science). It is important that expectations for vocabulary remain high for all students, including in low socio-economic contexts, as higher levels of engagement in learning correspond with deeper understanding of the meaning of words.

## Final message

Recent research has shown that students learn more when they are engaged in schooling with teachers who establish high expectations for behaviour and learning. This positive engagement in learning needs to begin during the early years of schooling and is particularly important for students from low-socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in order to be as successful at learning as their peers from high-SES backgrounds. The suggested strategies outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list of ways to improve student engagement but are offered as food for thought for teachers looking for ways to foster deep engagement in learning and improve classroom behaviour.

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