

LESSONS FROM THE PERIPHERY: ENGAGING GRADE 7 BOYS IN CORE DISCIPLINES THROUGH INCREASED STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE

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Abstract

In 2016, the annual Gallup Student Poll in the United States revealed that nearly three-quarters (74%) of all surveyed fifth-grade students were engaged with school, while only about one-third of surveyed students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades were engaged. Calderon and Yu (2017) further extrapolated from the poll data that, “There is a 13-percentage-point difference in engagement between sixth and seventh grade and a nine-point difference between seventh and eighth grade, with engagement declining as grade level for students increases.” Furthermore, Sax (2016) specifically labels this disengagement with school as a significant part of a “growing epidemic” (p.183) for boys.

For this action research project, I endeavored to explore whether my Grade 7 boys’ engagement could be increased by incorporating more elements of student voice and choice in a core academic discipline. I was particularly interested to see if the increased opportunities for developing student agency, more often found in the school periphery of extra-curricular activities, could potentially help address the aforementioned issue of boys’ disengagement as they progress through the “school engagement cliff” (Calderon & Yu, 2017) of Grade 7.

To facilitate this research, I created a new public speaking unit and worked with our administration and English faculty to add the unit to an English 7 class during the Fall 2019 trimester. This four-week curricular unit offered the boys wide-ranging choice in the topic they wanted to explore and offered a choice of various oral presentation formats through which to craft and share their voice on their chosen topic.

Throughout the project, the boys completed surveys, wrote responses to journal prompts, and shared their thoughts and feelings through class discussions and individual interviews. These data, along with teacher observation field notes, were then coded into categories of behavioral engagement and emotional engagement and then further analyzed and coded for specific characteristics of student engagement and characteristics of student disengagement.

My analysis of the research data led me to conclude that student choice of topic increased the behavioral and emotional engagement of the boys in my class. However, student choice of oral presentation style

was not enough to overcome the fears of many boys in this class toward sharing their voice in the front of the classroom and led to some emotional disengagement from that portion of the project.

This project reinforced my belief in the existing research that suggests opportunities for student agency, more often found in extra-curricular activities such as competitive Speech and Debate, must be incorporated into traditional disciplines in order to increase boys' engagement with school. Further research in this area might examine what else beyond choice can help boys become more comfortable sharing their voice in public speaking opportunities.

Introduction

The theme for the 2019-2020 International Boys School Coalition (IBSC) Action Research cohort was *Developing Agency: Boys Voice and Choice*. As a speech and debate educator for more than 15 years, this topic area excited me and compelled me to engage in action research. While the aforementioned experts on boys and national student polling can paint a grim picture of school engagement for boys in their middle school and high school years, I have also witnessed boys become deeply engaged with topics of their own choosing and then discover, develop, and share their own voices.

For this action research project, I wondered what would happen to the boys' engagement in a core academic discipline if we incorporated more opportunities for student voice and choice. The specific research question I sought to examine was: *How can student choice of topic and oral presentation style increase engagement of boys in a Grade 7 English class?*

Action research was an ideal methodology for examining my research question for a few reasons. First, the action research methodology is focused on the classroom setting, which is exactly where I wanted my project to be based. Second, action research allowed me to be reflective as the action was taking place, and allowed for adjustments, which I believe was very important, considering this was my first attempt at adapting speech and debate activities into the curriculum of a core discipline - quite different from the speech and debate electives I had taught previously and the extra-curricular events I have coached.

Another distinct advantage of choosing the action research methodology was that it "allows for the use of all types of data collected through the use of a wide variety of techniques" (Mertler 2017). In this action research project, I used a mixed methods approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.

In order to identify and measure the boys' engagement with the new unit involving voice and choice, I focused on two categories of student engagement detailed by Fredericks (2014) in *Eight Myths of Student Disengagement: Creating Classrooms of Deep Learning*: student behavioral engagement and student emotional engagement. In particular, the analysis of data from questionnaires, boys' reflections, group discussions, and field notes was based on the following guidelines from Fredericks (p. 22):

Behavioral engagement can be measured with questions that ask students about their attention, effort, persistence, attendance, time spent on homework, preparation for class, participation in school-based activities, and risky behaviors (e.g., skipping school).

Emotional engagement is measured with questions about emotions experienced in school, such as being happy or anxious. In addition, questions about students' level of interest, enjoyment, boredom, and perception of value of school, or how important school is, are also indicative of emotional engagement.

The baseline data showed that while there was certainly room for increased engagement, this class of boys already had a level of behavioral and emotional engagement in school somewhat higher than the national polling would suggest. Interestingly, when asked to reflect upon their favorite assignments during their Middle School years thus far, it was noted that many of the boys cited projects which had components of choice. It was also noted in these initial reflections that the boys did not include any assignments from their previous Middle School English classes when reflecting upon their favorite assignments. These reflections came before the research area or the specific action were mentioned to either the boys or their parents and thus the boys had no idea at the time that choice was a focus of this action. This baseline data helped affirm the importance of this action to add student choice to an English 7 unit.

Literature Review

Central to this action research project was a review of the existing research and literature that supports the premise that offering boys more voice and choice in a core academic discipline is one method teachers can employ to increase boys' engagement in school. Evans and Boucher (2015) discuss the same issues of student disengagement identified by Sax (2016) and Calderon and Yu (2017). They write, "The seemingly unmotivated student poses a particularly frustrating challenge for teachers, as every teacher knows how incredibly fun and engaging learning can be" (p.87). Their article synthesizes the findings from numerous previous educational research articles on the relationship between choice and engagement and applies the self-determination theory of motivation to explain the power of student choice. Evans and Boucher (2015) conclude, "Choice plays a critical role in promoting students' intrinsic motivation and deep engagement in learning" (p. 87).

Specifically discussing boys and engagement, Reichert (2019) writes about the need for "more interesting ideas" (p. 89) for schools which "consider both boys' personal agency and their lives as males" (p. 89). Further focusing on ways to address boys' disengagement in school, Reichert continues that "New research shows that boys can be reached and turned on.... Boys who were once defiant or floundering are

transformed. They learn to invest themselves and to take pride in their accomplishments” (p. 90). The connections between boys’ personal agency and boys’ engagement as observed by Reichert, support the overarching premise of this action research project that offering boys more voice and choice is one method teachers can employ to increase boys’ deeper engagement with their learning in a traditional class.

Mehta and Fine (2019) detail their findings from hundreds of hours of observations and interviews at thirty different schools across the United States with the goal of finding model schools and exemplary practices of students engaged in deeper learning. Despite focusing their research on what were considered some of the highest achieving and most innovative schools across America, Mehta and Fine observed that, even at these highly recommended and respected schools, “Most classrooms were spaces to sit passively and listen. Most academic work instructed students to recall, or minimally apply, what they had been told” (p. 4). Furthermore, the responses they gathered from students regarding the purpose of their learning in core academic disciplines disappointingly matched the data regarding learning disengagement from the annual Gallup Student Poll (2016) in the United States. Mehta and Fine considered abandoning their research project before widening their view beyond the classrooms of core academic disciplines. Regarding this shift in focus for their research, they note that, “Much of the most powerful learning seemed to occur not in core classes, but rather at the school’s “periphery” –in electives, clubs, and extracurriculars” (p. 5). Hidden in plain sight, these peripheral spaces offered students “real choices” and “time to explore matters in depth” (p. 5). After shadowing hundreds of students at various types of schools across the United States, Mehta and Fine concluded that increased engagement and deeper learning were occurring in:

Extracurricular activities such as theater, music, debate, newspaper, athletics, dance, Model United Nations, and many more, which students tell us have the depth, authenticity, and creative ethos that their core disciplinary classes tend to lack. These extracurricular spaces are not only more engaging, but also are actually more consistent with what we know makes for good platforms for learning. (p. 254)

This research reaffirmed my personal experiences with student engagement and deep learning in competitive speech and debate activities.

At the conclusion of their research, Mehta and Fine (2019) present a vision for schooling which can range from “a full-blown alternative” (p. 379) to elements which can be “adopted in pieces and married to a more conventional structure” (p. 379). The latter approach is the model for this action research project.

Regardless of approach, Mehta and Fine (2019) write:

Central to this vision are a set of presumptions about students, development, and learning that were shared across these environments but are often not present in traditional schooling. The first presumption understands students as purposeful, curious, capable beings who have interests that can be developed and who value being treated as responsible people. Consequently, for education in this mode to work, students need some choice and agency over their learning, coupled with guidance from more experienced students and adults. (p. 379)

These conclusions regarding student agency and choice clearly support attempts by teachers to bring elements from the periphery of extracurriculars to core academic disciplines. As it specifically relates to this action research project, these conclusions provide ample justification for examining whether a curricular unit based on competitive speech and debate activities can increase boys' engagement in a core academic discipline.

New approaches to teaching, and in particular approaches which require units to be completely retooled or created from scratch, take considerable time and effort (Oros 2007). Oros, however, also provides justification for the efforts required to carry out this action research project and similar projects in his analysis that, "nontraditional approaches to classroom instruction are worth the additional time they often require [in order to move students] further along the continuum" (p. 305) of engaged learning.

Within the context of the aforementioned literature, this action research endeavored to see if a traditionally structured English 7 class could adopt opportunities for student agency from extracurricular speech and debate activities and apply them to a core academic discipline in order to deepen engagement of boys in school.

Research Context

Princeton Academy of the Sacred Heart is an independent school for boys from Kindergarten through to Grade 8 located in Princeton, New Jersey - about equidistant between New York and Philadelphia in the northeast region of the United States. The school's mission is to develop young men with active and creative minds, a sense of understanding and compassion for others, and the courage to act on their beliefs. The school enrolls approximately 180 students each year, mostly from Princeton and the surrounding areas. The Princeton area benefits from being home to many international institutions and businesses. Therefore, families come to Princeton Academy from a variety of geographic locations around the world, providing the day school environment of Princeton Academy with a vibrant international community. The Princeton Academy student body is beautifully diverse and reflects genuine

socio-economic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. The school's program is rooted in the 200-year tradition and educational philosophy of the Society of the Sacred Heart and is guided by the school's own Learning Principles for Boys. In particular, this action research project was conducted in the context of the school community's first principle: *Boys learn best when they are the navigators of their own learning.*

The participants in this research were 29 boys in Grade 7 (ages 12-13 years-old). Since my primary role is Director of Technology and I do not currently have any classes of my own, I needed to work with a colleague for this action research project. The Grade 7 English teacher graciously agreed to co-teach a new public speaking unit with me.

Before the action research began, I presented to the parents of the Grade 7 boys at our school's "Back to School Night" about the project, and during the first class with the Grade 7 boys, I explained action research and a general overview of the project. After this class, I distributed and collected a form signed by each boy and one of their parents/guardians granting consent to be included in the action research. Throughout the project, much of the analysis was in aggregate, but specific responses by boys were also coded anonymously. The relevant boys also gave additional consent for their video recorded comments about the project to be included in my project video and my conference presentation.

The Action

For this action research project, a new unit was added to the English 7 class during the Fall 2019 trimester. This unit offered the boys wide-ranging choice in the topic they wanted to explore, as well a choice in the format they used to craft and orally present their voice on the topic.

In the first week of the action research, I introduced the project to the boys starting with topic choice. They spent a 40-minute class period exploring potential topics with a free range of choice. I then spent three class periods explaining the various oral presentation formats and sharing video examples of each type. These formats offered the boys a range of choice of how they might persuade or inform: writing and delivering a persuasive speech; writing and delivering an informative speech; preparing for, and engaging in, a structured student debate; assembling and presenting a collection of poems; or performing a segment from a work of literature. In class, the boys each met with me in order to discuss the synergy between their topic choice, format choice, and what they ultimately wanted to vocalize through this project.

In the second phase of the action, the boys researched their topics and crafted their presentations. This took place over two weeks during their English 7 lesson each week as well as some time in their rostered Study Hall period and for English 7 homework. Finally, in the third phase, the boys presented their work

during English 7 lessons. Each presentation was recorded for additional instructor review as well as self-evaluation and reflection by the boys.

Data Collection

I collected preliminary data from the class through a Likert-scale questionnaire and a written student reflection. The purpose of these preliminary data collections was to gain a greater understanding of the boys' baseline behavioral and emotional engagement levels with school in general and with class assignments specifically.

Throughout the action, the boys continued to complete additional Likert-scale questionnaires for comparison. The boys also wrote individual reflections, responded orally to prompts using the video software application, FlipGrid, and shared their thoughts and feelings in group discussions and individual interviews. Some group discussions and individual interviews were video-recorded and I kept field notes to record my observations from class meetings and interactions with the boys.

Data Analysis

After collecting quantitative data from the Likert-scale questionnaires completed by the boys, I coded each question as either a behavioral engagement question or an emotional engagement question based on the direction from Fredericks (2014). I also applied this same coding to data from the boys' reflections, group discussions, and field notes, using a process of organization, description, and interpretation. Additionally, in order to analyze the data and identify themes, I further coded the data into subcategories of specific characteristics of behavioral engagement/disengagement (attention, effort, persistence, preparation, and participation) as well as into specific characteristics of emotional engagement/disengagement (happiness, anxiety, interest, enjoyment, boredom enthusiasm, and investment).

Since many of the collected data points were qualitative, it was important to employ several methods for data analysis to ensure the data were credible and trustworthy. I utilized a process Mertler (2017) refers to as "polyangulation" to relate two or more types of data to confirm themes. The boys' reflections and group discussions often confirmed observations in my field notes or illuminated responses to the questionnaires. I also utilized another process Mertler (2017) refers to as "member checking" (p. 43). On a daily basis I discussed my observations and field notes with the primary English 7 teacher since he was present for the duration of the action research project. A third method from Mertler (2017) used was "peer debriefing" (p.43).

I engaged in regular conversations about the themes that I saw emerging from the data with my Head of School who served as my mentor for the action research. Since he was outside of the classroom but

familiar with my research, he provided an additional perspective. Finally, my IBSC Action Research Team Advisor and others involved with the program served as an external audit and were incredible resources with their years of experience facilitating and guiding action research projects.

Discussion of Findings

After the conclusion of the unit, the data collected during the action were analyzed and three key themes emerged. First, student choice of topic increased the behavioral engagement of the boys, specifically manifesting in the areas of attention, participation, effort, and persistence. Second, student choice of topic increased the emotional engagement of the boys, specifically manifesting in feelings of interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment, and investment. Third, student choice of presentation style was not enough to overcome the emotional disengagement of many boys in this class toward presenting their topics orally.

Choice of Topic Increased Boys' Behavioral Engagement

As mentioned previously, the baseline data showed that while this class of boys already had a high level of behavioral engagement in school and in assignments for other subject areas. The boys self-reported a positive behavioral engagement level at 78% of the class compared with the national average of 61% for seventh graders in the Gallup polling. Even so, as the boys went through the selection process of their own topic, researched their chosen topic, and created their chosen presentation style, the data analyzed from the boys' reflections and researcher field notes revealed behaviors of disengagement at the beginning of the project. They increasingly mentioned characteristics of behavioral engagement when they began working on the topic of their choice and individually diving into their own research

As the boys progressed in their work on their chosen topics, the specific characteristics of attention, participation, effort, and persistence became more frequent in their reflections and field notes. This was even true for the boys who self-reported lower levels of behavioral engagement with school in the baseline data.

In particular, the number of off-task behaviors were higher in the first week of class when the assignment was being introduced, as compared to the weeks when the boys were researching their selected topics in class and crafting their presentations. In an early reflection, one boy articulated what was observed in some early field notes, stating that, "it was hard to focus due to the fact people were talking" when the assignment was first introduced, but then later on in the project as the boys dove deeper into their own chosen topics, the same boy shared that, "Almost everyone was working hard on their research today."

Choice of Topic Increased Boys' Emotional Engagement

The baseline data for this class of boys showed a slightly lower level of emotional engagement in school and in projects than it did for their behavioral engagement. The boys self-reported a positive emotional engagement level at 65% of the class again compared with the national average of 61% for Seventh Graders in the Gallup polling. As the boys worked more on their chosen topics, their reflections and researcher field notes included more references to emotional engagement, specifically the characteristics of interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment, and investment.

Early on in the action, data from the boys' reflections and field notes showed emotions of anxiety and nervousness at the introduction of the assignment and the exercises around choosing a topic. Additionally, the questions asked by boys in class and by email showed more anxiety and nervousness around the lack of length requirements and grading rubrics for the reflections and smaller steps in the assignment. One boy asked in class, "can you please share the rubric?" when we had barely begun the first exercises around choosing topics of interest to them. When I responded that we did not need to focus on that part of the project yet, I noted additional audible grumblings and facial expressions from classmates.

These initial characteristics of emotional disengagement, particularly anxiety and nervousness in the assignment introduction and topic selection phase were mostly replaced by data points of emotional engagement in the form of heightened interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment and ultimately some personal investment in the student chosen topics. Writing about their feelings during the assignment, one boy said, "I really liked how we had the freedom to choose our own topic," while another wrote that, "The researching was fun because I got to read a lot of sources on my topic." Yet another boy shared that, "In the beginning, I was anxious, as I thought this would be very important and I couldn't mess up, but I have now realized that this project is meant to be enjoyable as well as educational, and I have had lots of fun stud[y]ing my topic." Finally, reflecting on the assignment, some boys shared comments which showed a higher level of emotional engagement namely personal investment. One boy reflected, "I'm willing to put [in] work and take pride in this project," while another wrote, "I am excited to share my experiences and knowledge with my classmates."

At the conclusion of the action, the boys reflected on their feelings around choice in their school assignments more generally. One boy wrote, "I would prefer more opportunities in school to choose my own topics because then I can be more interested in what I am learning. I believe this would make us like our subjects more and enjoy our time [in school]." Another boy wrote, "Choice is very good to have, especially in school.... It makes most assignments more fun and improve[s] my attitude towards them. It makes me look forward to them."

Choice of Topic and Format Were Not Enough to Overcome Many Boys' Emotional Disengagement with Oral Presentations

In addition to choice of topic area, the boys were also given the choice to craft and present their voices on their topic through various different oral presentation styles inspired by events offered in competitive speech and debate: an informative speech, a persuasive speech, a debate, a short theatrical performance, or a poetry program. The initial presentation questionnaire, as well as the boys' reflections and field notes, indicated that there was interest in a diversity of presentation styles including a few students selecting debates, theatrical performances, and poetry programs. However, as the action progressed, only one boy chose to express his voice on his topic through a poetry program and the rest all chose to present either an informative or persuasive speech.

Additionally, the qualitative data from the boys' reflections and field notes showed that although a few students expressed "confidence" in presenting, most boys did not share this emotional engagement during this phase. Unlike the topic research and presentation creation phases, the emotions of anxiety and nervousness returned for many of the boys as they prepared for the oral presentation phase of the action.

When asked why they changed oral presentation styles, some boys indicated comfort in presenting in a format that "felt familiar" and was "closer to an essay," which they already experienced in this class setting. Additionally, in their individual reflections and a group discussion, some boys also indicated feelings of comfort in presenting the same format that other students had chosen because they could "ask each other" and "watch what others did." In this class, choice of presentation style in this assignment was not enough to overcome the emotional disengagement that many of the boys in this class associated with presenting orally. I began to increasingly identify disengagement characteristics of anxiety and nervousness; ten of the boys pivoted away from their initial choices of more unique presentation formats and instead sought some comfort in the two format options which most closely matched their prior presentation experiences. Additionally, as we reached this final phase of the project, enthusiasm while still present in some, was less prevalent in the boys' reflections and field notes. The characteristics of emotional disengagement that arose during this phase seemed to indicate that choice of their own topic and choice of a presentation style were not enough to overcome the anxiety and nervousness of some boys for the oral presentation portion of the project.

Conclusions

Providing more student agency through choice of topic increased the behavioral engagement and emotional engagement of the boys in this class. Unfortunately, student choice of oral presentation style

was not enough to overcome the emotional disengagement of many boys in this class toward sharing their voice in the front of the classroom.

This project reinforced my belief in the existing research that suggests opportunities for student agency, more often found in extra-curricular activities such as competitive Speech and Debate, must be incorporated in traditional disciplines in order to increase boys' engagement with school. Further research in this area may examine what else beyond choice can help boys become more comfortable sharing their voice through various oral presentation styles.

Reflection

As a coach of inter-scholastic speech and debate teams on the high school and middle school levels for over 15 years, I have seen the short-term and long-term impact that involvement in speech and debate activities can have for boys. This action research project reaffirmed my belief that some of this experience can be adapted for core disciplines and can increase engagement for boys in a traditional classroom.

Every boy, not just those involved in a deeply engaging extra-curricular such as speech and debate team, can benefit from the personal agency development which comes from the opportunities for student voice and choice inherent in these activities.

I hope that my school and other schools can benefit from seeing the effects of increased voice and choice through curricular units of speech and debate. Additionally, I hope that my action research helped the boys involved in the project change their perceptions of learning, sparked a desire for them to assume a greater role in choosing what they learn and how they learn it, and finally provided them with the tools to continue developing their own authentic voices.

The time I spent in the classroom during this research project was some of the most personally and professionally fulfilling moments from my time at Princeton Academy. It has made me yearn for a return to the classroom at some point in my career. However, trying to manage the demands of my full-time technology job with preparing and teaching a new unit was extremely difficult and adding the demands of conducting action research at the same time was completely overwhelming. As if those challenges weren't enough, the timing of the COVID-19 global pandemic and our unexpected shift to distance learning further exacerbated my issues with workload. Thankfully my Headmaster, Rik Dugan, who was my mentor for this action research project, provided encouragement throughout and pursued additional technology support so I could complete my research and this report. My IBSC Action Research Team Advisor, Polly Higgins, with her endless positivity and patience was instrumental in helping to push me to complete the action research project

Additionally, all of my previous classroom teaching experience was with high school boys, so I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my colleague Nathan Weaver who was incredibly supportive throughout the action portion of this project. There was quite a learning curve adjusting to teaching middle school boys while also introducing a brand new unit.

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