

## What Engages Adolescent Learners?

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Tanner LeBaron Wallace (University of Pittsburgh) and Vichet Chhuon (University of Minnesota) report on their study of teaching and learning in two Pittsburgh high schools and two youth development programs in St. Paul/Minneapolis. Wallace and Chhuon were looking for teacher-student interactions that resulted in urban adolescents engaging in learning – or turning away from academic striving. They believe engagement has four components:

- Behavioral – what students do
- Emotional – how students feel
- Cognitive – what students think
- Agency – students providing input to their learning

Underlying these elements is students feeling *known* in school. When teachers know their students and find ways to engage them behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively, achievement increases.

“Attending to the competing management and instructional demands of an urban classroom requires a tremendous amount of social and emotional competence on the part of a teacher,” say Wallace and Chhuon. Their interviews turned up vivid examples of high and low points as the students (all of color) interacted with their predominantly white teachers. The study pinpointed three factors that create successful instructional interactions:

- *Students feeling heard in class* – In high-engagement classes, students said the teachers were attuned to their needs, listened to student input and criticism, and said things like “I’ll work on that” and “Ask me.” In low-engagement classes, students felt ignored or that their voice was being overpowered; students said the teacher “doesn’t listen,” “ignores,” “walks away.” Much of this negative interaction was associated with the struggle for discipline in classrooms which, in turn, is exacerbated by students not feeling heard.

- *Students feeling they are taken seriously* – In high-engagement classes, teachers gave the benefit of the doubt to students, authentically included their experiences in the curriculum, and went the extra mile to support their learning; students used words like “help,” “feedback,” and “guide.” In low-engagement classes, students felt teachers were applying stereotypes to them and rejecting their perspective; they used words like “misunderstood” and “prove ourselves.”

- *Teachers going all in* – In high-engagement classes, students said teachers were enthusiastic, uninhibited, and focused on making connections with students and course materials; students used words like “speaking my language,” “connect to real life,” and “not going to give up.” In low-engagement classes, students saw teachers as inconsistent or absent and not committing to student relationships or learning; they used words like, “just teach,” “getting so little,” and “complete slacker.”

“Proximal Processes in Urban Classrooms: Engagement and Disaffection in Urban Youth of Color” by Tanner LeBaron Wallace and Vichet Chhuon in *American Educational Research Journal*, October 2014 (Vol. 51, #5, p. 937-973), <http://bit.ly/1CMMkJ6>; Wallace can be reached at [twallace@pitt.edu](mailto:twallace@pitt.edu).