

Essential Strategies for Inclusive Teaching - ASCD

13-17 minutes

Emerging data on student academic outcomes during the pandemic indicate that Black students (and other underserved groups) suffered academic losses in areas such as reading and math (Dorn et al., 2020). Many teachers struggled to get Black students to consistently engage during the pandemic. But to be clear, this issue didn't suddenly appear during remote instruction; many teachers struggled to engage Black students *prior* to the pandemic, and this dynamic was only exacerbated by the impersonal nature of remote learning. As we return to in-person instruction, it's crucial to ask: How can educators better motivate and engage Black students?

Shifting the Discourse

Discussions about this question often pathologize Black students, focusing on their surface actions while paying little attention to conditions in the classroom that inevitably affect student engagement, behavior, and learning. If a student frequently puts her head down in class, she's often thought of as listless. Less is said about the possibly lackluster instruction or exclusionary environment that may be causing her to disengage. As educators, we must shift the discourse around engagement and motivation for Black students to focus on how teacher actions could create more inclusive, responsive, and stimulating learning environments. We believe creating such classrooms would catalyze Black student engagement.

Student engagement is often described as meaningful student involvement in the learning process, with heightened attention and focus on learning tasks. Engagement typically increases when educators (1) take time to investigate their students' identities and interests and find ways to incorporate those into meaningful academic tasks, and (2) foster good relationships with students. But for Black students, engagement also requires ensuring that classroom materials, culture, and environment are inclusive and affirming of Black students' lives, histories, and backgrounds—and uprooting any anti-Blackness.

Student engagement often correlates with student motivation—one reason it has been increasingly viewed as a key to addressing problems like low achievement, student boredom, absenteeism, and high dropout rates. Research specifically links student engagement to favorable learning outcomes for minoritized student groups (Borman & Overman, 2004).

It's clear how important engaging Black students is. Let's look at five strategies for making it happen.

The Five Strategies

1. Offer Students Voice and Choice

Making space for student voice and choice in the classroom gives students a sense of autonomy in the learning process. Student voice and choice means more than letting students select from various assignment options; it means allowing students to develop a sense of ownership of the classroom and their own learning. This is especially important for Black students, who've historically been excluded in academic spaces. Traditionally, these students have had little to no input into what content they learn and how they learn it. This power imbalance often leads to disengagement.

Educators should empower students by including them in decisions about what they learn—and how. For instance, while meeting a few key standards, students could learn science content through an inquiry project that lets them explore a scientific phenomenon within their own community that interests them, such as identifying the location of toxic waste sites or researching whether there is a correlation between high asthma rates in Black communities and the locations of landfills. Or students might examine change in climate temperatures by looking at global warming over time, and research the causes for shifts toward warming and what geographical areas are most affected. Offering options for learning activities benefits teachers. There's less need for redirecting and consequences because students have greater ownership of their work, and more space for building respectful relationships.

Voice and Choice

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2. Use Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning arrangements are essential to engaging and motivating Black students. For many students, learning is as much about social interaction as it is about academic instruction. So try learning arrangements—such as pair share, quads, small group interactions, or extended group projects—that allow students to hear from peers, share ideas, and discuss concepts they may not be clear on. Zaretta Hammond (2014) talks about two important cultural archetypes students possess to varying degrees: collectivism or individualism. She notes that many students of color, because of their collectivist cultural background, are more accustomed to thinking, doing, and learning collaboratively rather than working individually. This doesn't suggest that all Black students learn best collaboratively; but it does indicate that offering a variation in learning arrangements could benefit more students by acknowledging differences in students' learning preferences.

Effective collaborative learning doesn't come easy. It's not a matter of just putting students together in a group and expecting magic to happen; learning to work this way takes time and necessitates a change in mindset for everyone involved. It helps to explicitly lay out the goals and purpose of any collaborative activity and clarify student roles. Assigning roles can be done through letting students choose based on their preferences, daily role rotations, or random role assignments. Think of the transition to collaborative approaches as a journey your class is taking. As you progress on the journey, you'll refine how you do things, finding what works best for engaging and motivating students.

3. Practice "Warm Demanding"

Engaging and motivating Black students is contingent on teachers having an authentic, sustained belief in these students' ability to succeed. Low expectations won't increase engagement and motivation for Black students. To the contrary, limited expectations will contribute to limited participation and engagement, and lead many of these learners to believe that teachers simply don't have faith in their ability to learn.

Instead, teachers need to practice *warm demanding*. Judith Kleinfeld (1975) coined this phrase in 1975 to describe exemplary teaching for Athabascan Indian and Eskimo 9th graders in Alaskan schools. Teachers who are warm demanders are empathetic and caring yet hold their students accountable; maintain high expectations for them; and expose them to instruction full of rigor, depth, and complexity. A similar approach is required to engage and motivate Black students.

Kleinfeld talked about five aspects of warm demanding, and school leaders should make sure all their teachers employ these practices, especially with students of color: (1) building relationships deliberately, (2) learning about students' cultures, (3) communicating an expectation of success, (4) providing learning supports, and (5) being clear and consistent on expectations. We would also add ensuring that culturally relevant learning materials are used in lessons and materials.

Holding students accountable to high expectations for learning and creating a supportive environment centered

on high praise, scaffolded learning, and cultural affirmation goes a long way to engage and motivate Black students—all students, in fact.

Rather than relying on students to come into the classroom attentive and eager to learn, educators should create conditions that encourage students to want to learn.



4. Tap the Power of Dynamic Instruction

In thinking about student engagement, we often overlook the power of dynamic instruction. *The manner in which* teachers deliver content is just as vital as the content itself. Dynamic instruction entails approaches that ask students to think critically, reflect, discuss, make conceptual connections, problem solve, and utilize other high-engagement cognitive processes, so they come to understand content through active learning. Such instruction stimulates thought, expands ideas, and gives students the ability to solve complex problems, comprehend what they learn, and synthesize new information into existing schema.

So, what does dynamic, stimulating instruction look like? It starts with a teacher explicitly expressing high expectations for students to engage with the content, then involves active learning in which students explore, hypothesize, discuss, create, and take risks. Teachers often start by asking introductory questions to kick off a lesson or using a story or analogy to draw students into key concepts. It takes place in a learning environment that respects and encourages diverse ways of knowing, thinking, expressing, and interpreting material.

Consider a series of lessons focused on how racism currently affects Black people that Mrs. Walker, a high school English teacher in Los Angeles that Tyrone (one of the coauthors) works with, conducted with her students. Mrs. Walker was teaching a lesson on anti-Black racism, and she opened the class by saying she was excited to hear students' insights and perspectives around the question of how racism affects Black lives in the United States today. She then established ground rules for student discussion (rules she uses for all "courageous conversations" in her class):

- Keep an open mind.
- Be respectful.
- Be reflective.
- Be an active listener.

- Stay engaged.
- Be empathetic.

She placed students in groups of four and told each group to choose one of the following questions, then research pertinent topics and form a response to the question:

- How have Black women expanded our understanding of racial inequality and freedom?
- What is intersectionality? How does it help us understand racism?
- Why is political inclusion important to Black freedom?

Over the course of a week-long lesson, students were asked to find and study related research articles, primary/secondary artifacts, and video clips and to construct possible counter-arguments to their initial responses to the questions. Essentially, students had to be aware of an argument running counter to the answer they gave to the question, even if they didn't accept that counterstance. Students then participated in a jigsaw activity in which students from each group shared their responses with students from other groups. Mrs. Walker then brought everyone back together to discuss these questions as a class. What followed was a rich, stimulating discussion. Students were clearly engaged and thinking about the content.

The dynamic elements here were the social, cultural, and political relevance of the content, which has been shown to increase student engagement (Howard et al., 2019); the collective research, thinking, and discussing; and an arrangement involving no "right" answers.

5. Create Meaningful Partnerships with Families

Developing relationships and partnering with families is a crucial part of engaging students in learning. Parents and caregivers are critical to students' intellectual and emotional growth and achievement, and the quality of the relationships between students' families and their educators tremendously impacts educational outcomes.

Connecting with families gives teachers insight into how students communicate at home, what they are interested in, and what their families value. This is especially important when engaging with Black families because the overwhelming majority of classroom teachers are white. This racial and cultural mismatch makes it imperative for non-Black educators to position themselves as learners interested in the families of Black students—their practices, culture, and values—which allows educators to develop meaningful connections with these caregivers.

Teachers should develop a set of practices and approaches centered on the notion that Black families have assets to share. Quality connections between home and school can dismantle traditional hierarchies between caregivers and teachers by honoring the equally valuable assets that families, students, and educators each bring to the learning enterprise. Here are some ideas for connecting with families and recognizing and tapping the assets they have to offer.

- At the beginning of the school year, send parents or caregivers a letter or short video introducing yourself. Highlight things about yourself that will likely matter most to parents and students, such as where you're from, why you became an educator, a few things about your family, and your hobbies.
- Using Flipgrid, TikTok, or any asynchronous video-based tool, set up a way for students and caregivers to make a video introducing themselves to you individually, including sharing something they're really good at. You might have them respond to a prompt that will give you "good to know" information (like "I love it when teachers ___" or "It bothers me when teachers ___"). Repeat this process near the end of each marking period, if possible, to open a space for students and caregivers to give you feedback.
- Send home an "intake" form that allows caregivers (or the student) to confidentially let you know any background information, needs, triggers, or sensitivities you should be aware of in providing care and

instruction to the student.

- Establish a dedicated, confidential classroom-home communication channel (text message-based is likely best) to use for quick and consistent exchanges with caregivers.

It's in Our Power

As former teachers ourselves, we believe deeply in the power of teachers to create classroom environments that yield student success. We believe it's educators' responsibility to create such environments and to find ways to engage and motivate all students—but especially Black students, who often find their need for relevant instruction unmet and, as a result, disengage from school. Rather than relying on students to come into the classroom attentive and eager to learn, educators must create the conditions that encourage students to be attentive and drive them to *want* to learn. The strategies recommended here don't require any specialized training or unusual skills, though they may require some real changes in mindset—and definitely a commitment to listening and learning from Black students and their families in an effort to create classroom environments that work—for all students.