



## TREP CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Chronic exposure to community violence and the resulting loss of safety affects all aspects of children's functioning: cognitive development, emotion and behavior regulation, attachment, and self-concept. In the classroom traumatization can show up as inability to remain seated, noncompliance, lack of focus and motivation, forgetting information previously mastered, and other challenging behaviors.

Trauma responsive educators understand that these are not disciplinary issues, and instead recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma, proactively teach positive behaviors, and actively resist actions that re-traumatize children and youth.

Because managing a classroom of students coping with high levels of traumatic stress can seem overwhelming, these research-to-practice briefs are a dedicated space to ensure that educators serving students living in high crime neighborhoods are equipped with trauma responsive educational practices.

### What Teachers Can Do to Engage Adolescents

A student's disengagement at school is strongly and positively associated with their likelihood of dropping out, while a high level of engagement is associated with academic success. Engagement is especially important in high school, because academic performance during this time directly affects students' chances of entering college, and because they are in a critical period of identity formation.

#### Types of Engagement

Classroom engagement is a student's active, responsive state in the classroom, which is

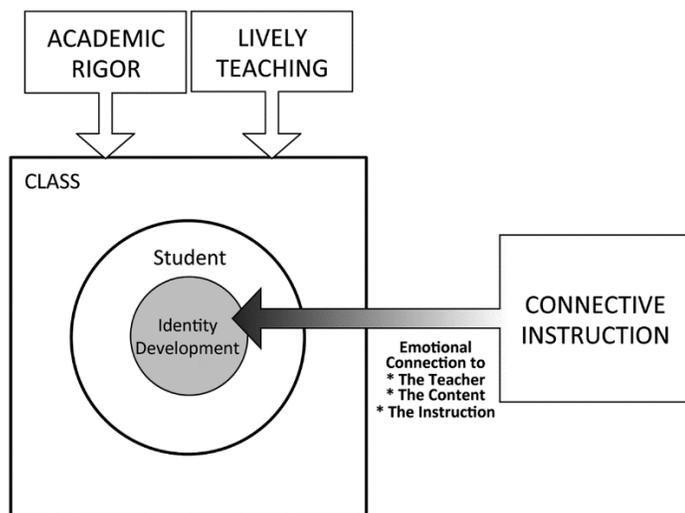
achieved through concentrated behavior, emotion, and cognition.

**Behavioral engagement** is the most readily noticeable aspect of engagement. It includes students' display of expected classroom behaviors such as listening to instruction, participating and completing assignments.

**Cognitive engagement** involves the level of mental energy a student expends during a given lesson. Lessons that require students to think and grapple with challenging concepts lead to this form of engagement.

**Emotional engagement** taps into a student’s feelings of comfort, positivity and personal interest in a class or lesson. This involves a general sense of investment and enjoyment in the content.

Teaching approaches for attending to student engagement can focus on either class-wide or individual-level practices. **Academic rigor**, the amount of cognitive engagement being asked of students in given lesson and **lively instruction**, teaching practices that emphasize active learning opportunities, are common class-wide approaches. They are used to address cognitive and behavioral engagement, respectively.



**Connective instruction** is a teaching approach which is used to address emotional engagement. It consists of teaching content relevant to students’ identities, conveying concern, demonstrating understanding of students, affirming students and their identities, using humor to relate to students, and encouraging self-expression.

- **Connections to content** happen when students sense that lessons are relevant and meaningful.
- **Connections to the teacher** happen overtime as students and teachers get to know each other personally share positive interactions.

- **Connections to instruction** are shaped as students build new competencies and learn from their past mistakes.

The relational components of connective instruction can be particularly salient for older students. Additionally, finding personal relevance in their work speaks to the identity development of adolescents and young adults. Research shows that adolescents are most emotionally engaged when participating in activities and relationships that positively impact their identity development.

### Comparing Approaches

An analysis of survey data from a diverse group of over one thousand high school students revealed that not all engagement practices are equally effective. Although academic rigor, lively instruction, and connective teaching all helped to explain higher levels of student engagement in class, lively instruction seemed to play much less of a role than the other two. Connective instruction had the strongest relationship to student engagement. Interestingly, lively instruction seemed to have very different relationships with both academic rigor and

“The relationship between connective instruction and engagement was more than seven times stronger than the relationships for rigor or lively teaching.”

connective instruction. In a classroom that had high rates of both lively instruction and academic rigor, the relationship between academic rigor and student engagement was improved. Conversely, and somewhat surprisingly, in classrooms with high levels of both lively teaching and connective instruction, the relationship between connective instruction and engagement

was decreased. So much so that that the influence of connective instruction on student engagement was seven times stronger in classrooms where lively instruction was low.

This seems to suggest that strategies that games and entertaining activities can be one way to get students interested in content, but it is unlikely to result in the high levels of engagement which can be gained through creating lessons that are intellectually challenging and, perhaps more importantly, personally relevant for students. Lively teaching, without academic rigor and connective instruction, is an ineffective approach to eliciting engagement.

### **Student Voices**

When a smaller group of the same students were asked about teachers who scored high in connective instruction, they described instructors who took the time to explain how lessons were relevant to their lives. These teachers were described as humorous, approachable, respectful and caring.

For example, when describing a history teacher with an academically rigorous and connectively engaging classroom, one student explained: “He’s outstanding when it comes to caring about your work and all that and caring about you, and he’s always motivating us to do better.” This same

teacher echoed the student’s sentiment in stating, “I truly believe that kids will not put out for you unless they know that you care... One thing that I learned when I was in the military, you can take an East L.A. gang-banger... and turn them into one hell of a soldier if they know that you care. Well I bring that same attitude here.”

So, when a teacher is struggling to find ways to connect to students, can anything be done to help with engagement? When surveyed about a Biology teacher with an emotionally distant and “professional orientation” to teaching, students unsurprisingly rated her highly on both academic rigor and lively teacher but low in connective instruction. Even so, when interviewed about this teacher students were not negative. One student shared, “I think she’s a good teacher, and I think the whole class kind of agrees... A good teacher is able to explain new information in a way we can start to understand.”

Finding one’s own authentic way of engaging students is essential to developing strong instructional practice. When considering ways to engage students, it important that teacher’s go beyond a cursory consideration of fun activities and do the more pressing work of ensuring that students are both intellectually stimulated and emotionally supported in the classroom.

### **Adapted From:**

Cooper, K. S. (2014). Eliciting engagement in the high school classroom: A mixed-methods examination of teaching practices. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(2), 363-402.