School Context:

Our school is a new school, and when it opened, children arrived from different schools, cities, and countries. These are children with different habits, different behavioral cultures, different beliefs, and values. At first, it was difficult for them to adapt. The same happened with the teachers. More than 2,500 children are enrolled in the school. The school staff and teachers number 180 people.

The problem that concerns us:

In the rapidly changing educational landscape, teachers are increasingly facing the problem of declining student interest in learning activities. Modern schoolchildren live in a world saturated with information, technological distractions, and a fast-paced lifestyle. In such conditions, keeping the attention of adolescents during lessons becomes a real challenge. This is especially true for middle school students.

Teachers have started to complain that children are not engaged in the educational process. It is difficult to get students to participate in academic competitions (and the presence of competition participants affects the school rating). Administrators, when walking by, often make comments that children are on their phones or chatting at the back of the classroom and are not engaged in the lesson.

So we began to wonder: “How can we increase student engagement in the lesson?” This question had been bothering us for quite some time.

We have already studied the topic of engagement and know that teachers and students understand engagement differently. But what we agreed on is that the class we decided to study was taught by teachers from the core five, and students themselves were coming and asking for something to be done, because the lessons were very noisy and it prevented teachers from teaching and students from learning — to the extent that several students had transferred to other classes.

After reviewing the literature, we focused on the work of Fredricks et al. (2004), where engagement is considered as a combination of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. It’s important not only to participate in tasks but also to have internal interest, involvement, and an understanding of the meaning of what is happening.

In the article by Skinner and Belmont (1993), the importance of teacher behavior is emphasized: support, attention, and respect for the student's personality are directly linked to the level of their engagement.

In Russian studies (e.g., Kondakova and Shchukina, 2019), the importance of the school environment, a comfortable atmosphere, and an individual approach is highlighted.

In our current case, we were interested in the term that is the opposite of engagement: **disaffection**. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), disaffected children are passive, do not put in much effort, and easily give up in the face of difficulties. They may be bored, feel depressed, anxious, or even angry about being in the classroom; they may reject learning opportunities or even rebel against teachers and classmates — exactly what we observed in the class.

From our previous research, we understood that engagement encompasses much more than just activity in class. It is about interest, participation, intrinsic motivation, and a sense of meaning in learning.

Colleen McLaughlin (2015) believes that engagement is an essential part of a student's well-being and educational success. She emphasizes that without psychological safety and personal interest, sustainable learning motivation cannot be formed.

In our opinion, the class showed low engagement in learning, and we set ourselves the task of increasing it.

How to increase the engagement of 9th-grade students

Methodology:

- Conversation with parents
- Conversation with students
- Blob Tree diagnostics
- Student survey
- Teacher interviews
- Lesson observation
- Psychological diagnostics
- Focus group interviews (5 girls, 5 boys)
- Individual student interviews

There are 25 students in the class, including 8 girls and 17 boys.
We held a parent meeting and informed them that a study would be conducted in their class, through which we would like to help students and increase their motivation to learn and engagement. Two parents had questions about consenting to the study, but after conversations with the principal and the homeroom teacher, the parents gave their consent.

We held a general discussion with the class to explain that we wanted to conduct a study. After talking with the students and asking them to complete the Blob Tree diagnostics, the team noticed a pattern: students who rated learning as a high value were more likely to strive to study. Those who were not engaged in lessons and constantly distracted others and provoked both students and teachers — for them, learning was not a priority.

A mentoring session helped us understand that our goal was to identify and understand the reason for low engagement, not simply the presence or absence of values in students.

Therefore, at the next stage, we planned lesson observations. We created a schedule and attended lessons according to that schedule. We used an observation protocol that was developed during the SHARE2 project. After observing lessons, we met weekly with teachers to share our observations. The school principal also attended lessons and shared her observations.

The observations showed that students were passive, often lacked materials, and nearly half the class did not follow teacher instructions or complete assignments. Four students regularly provoked teachers. Many teachers raised their voices. Most tasks were taken from textbooks. When assignments involved using phones, students often played games or browsed social media under the pretense of working on the assignment. Teachers did not notice this. Discipline was present in some lessons.

Psychological diagnostics showed that 9 students were in a risk zone or in a depressive state, and consultations with a psychologist were recommended. After working through each case, the psychologist noted that the depression was related to family issues. She also met with the parents. Additionally, the diagnostics showed that most students in the class possessed leadership qualities but were using them in a destructive way. The psychologist recommended involving them more in social projects and school life.

We also conducted an engagement questionnaire, where we asked students about their involvement in school life and their subjects. An interesting observation was that the subjects students described as the most boring and disliked — and in which they showed no engagement — were those taught by very strict and demanding teachers using traditional teaching methods.

We also held focus group interviews with boys and girls and discovered that the responses from boys and girls differed.

A semi-structured focus group interview, which addressed classroom atmosphere, approaches to learning and teaching, and gave students an opportunity to voice suggestions, revealed that students agreed on several points: they did not want to work in groups of more than three people, and many admitted they had gaps in their knowledge. Students also emphasized that they had stopped asking questions because many teachers were unwilling to answer them, saying, “That’s material from 5th grade.”

“If only teachers listened carefully and answered questions without scolding.” “Sometimes I don’t want to study when the teacher gives us assignments without any interest or willingness to explain the topic.” “If you ask something, she starts yelling.” “I like when the teacher doesn’t shout at us but calmly explains the material — it’s easier for me to focus and understand the topic.”“It’s important when the teacher knows how to listen to us and takes our opinions into account when choosing assignments or discussion topics — it helps us feel like part of the class.”

We came to the conclusion that not all teachers hear their students, and students are not interested because the assignments are the same for everyone.

At a staff meeting, we discussed assignments and instructions, as well as unified requirements. We realized there were no consistent expectations for conducting lessons. Some teachers paid no attention to the psychological atmosphere in class, some required phones to be collected, while others allowed their use.

We also focused on the issue of knowledge gaps and delved so deeply into the topic that we decided to change our research question to: **“How does differentiated instruction affect student achievement?”** We planned to hold a teacher session on how to use differentiated approaches.

However, during the sessions, we were advised to focus on the data we had already gathered and not jump straight to action.

Murray et al. (2005:2) define the following characteristics of a school that promote student engagement:

- Positive teacher-student relationships characterized by respect and high expectations for all students.

In the interviews, students said that teachers, other classes, and even the administration considered this class incapable. No one had high expectations of them.

We understood that we had to pay attention not only to the cognitive component of engagement but also to the emotional and social aspects.

Therefore, we held a training session for teachers that revealed how differently students perceive lessons. We shared the "Student Voice" and many teachers admitted they recognized themselves in some of the students' comments: "It's important when a teacher knows our names and addresses each of us personally — it shows we matter and builds trust." "Teachers often don't trust us when we show our homework. Why are they so sure we copied it? Maybe we worked all night and completed it ourselves? But we're already labeled." "Sometimes when students behave poorly in lessons, it might be because the teacher constantly yells at them — and this is their way of getting back at them. Also, teachers behave differently. One checks homework, another doesn't; one is strict and demanding, another gives tasks and doesn't even check them. Then why should we do them?"

We would also like to note the role of the principal in the study. She quickly resolved the issue of scheduling meetings and organized them in such a way that all subject teachers could participate. This allowed us to see how simple it can actually be — if all stakeholders, including the administration, are involved and can quickly create the necessary conditions.

We initially assumed that the principal's role would be more large-scale and strategic. However, in this part of the research, she chose to be directly involved, as the creation of this patriotic education class "Zhas Sarbaz" had been her idea, and she was personally invested in the fate of the class. Later, she acknowledged that she may not have fully controlled the class formation process, and many homeroom teachers had assigned students with significant behavioral difficulties and pedagogical neglect to this class.

We were also concerned by the survey results showing that only 8 students from the class felt they could confide in an adult at school. The rest either did not trust adults or were unsure whether it was worth doing so.

At the end of the third quarter, we assigned each student a teacher who attempted to initiate an open dialogue. This helped relieve emotional stress and resolve several individual issues.

However, our attempt to involve students in social and academic projects or in the work of the school parliament was not successful. Only one student demonstrated responsibility and joined the student council. Three students participated in a robotics project, but the subject teacher constantly complained about their lack of independence and responsible attitude toward group work.

We organized extra classes in subjects where knowledge gaps were observed. However, not all students took part in these lessons.

We asked teachers to apply active learning methods during their lessons and to follow unified rules for both teachers and students (e.g., collecting phones if they were not needed, not skipping the organizational moment, monitoring the classroom atmosphere, involving students in setting goals and topics, answering questions, etc.).

In the final interview, one student shared that, in his opinion, the fact that some classmates improved their academic performance and began working on their knowledge gaps allowed them to demonstrate higher engagement than before. However, the policy of collecting phones before class was perceived as a punishment and a red flag in the lesson.

He also noticed that some teachers, especially younger ones, had changed their teaching style, started incorporating more interactive and active learning methods.

When we discussed how sustainable the changes were and interviewed the students, we began to realize that the effect of our actions was more temporary than lasting. In the future, we need to apply less control and provide more support to our students.

One positive outcome was that students became more open and began approaching members of the administration with their issues. Trust was established. Not all students became highly active, but the emotional climate improved: there was more dialogue and less passivity and formal attitudes toward assignments. Again, this does not apply to all lessons and not to all teachers.

Not all teachers followed the new guidelines. Teachers approaching retirement age maintained the opinion that the problem lay entirely with the students.

The homeroom teacher noted that students felt more valued after the interviews. During these interviews, students also described specific lessons they found boring. This led us to think that organizing an open dialogue between teachers and students, or encouraging teachers to regularly seek student feedback, could be a valuable step. During our lesson observations, we only formally saw this feedback aspect and failed to recognize its importance. Yet, student feedback could help teachers adjust future lesson plans more effectively.

We didn’t manage to implement everything we had planned, partly because we miscalculated the timeline, and sometimes delayed actions while waiting for each other to initiate steps. This showed us how crucial teamwork is — the sense of support and the contribution of every team member.

We also realized that we want to improve our skills in data analysis — how not to lose focus when handling a large amount of data, how to identify the key areas for action. We saw the critical role of data-driven and evidence-based decision-making.

This research became not just a pedagogical experiment, but a kind of personal discovery. We became convinced that student engagement is not only about students — it is about the teacher’s style of work, the classroom atmosphere, the opportunity for choice, and mutual trust. We also clearly saw that there is a broader issue in teaching and learning — namely, the absence of a shared vision and effective teaching strategies. As one of our next steps, we plan to continue studying this topic further.

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