

Support Sheet #6

Priority Schools Funding Program



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Conclusion

In PSFP schools the main challenges for teachers include raising expectations and improving engagement, retention and learning outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds.

In low SES communities, students particularly rely on teachers and schools to provide the means by which to participate in schooling and engage with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will lead to success at school. This involves a shared responsibility for all members of the school community if students are to view themselves as engaged learners with a long term commitment to school.

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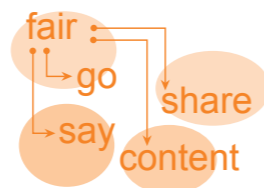
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What do we mean by participation?

Participation is the purposeful and sustained engagement of students in school, classroom and home learning activities. It involves the integration of strategies to improve students' literacy and numeracy outcomes through student engagement.

In schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds active participation of students needs to be understood as something more than attendance and retention. Isolated, compensatory activities which temporarily boost student self-esteem reflect tokenistic views of student participation in learning.

Participation in Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) School Communities

Why is a focus on participation important for schools serving low socio-economic status communities?

Research clearly states that students from low SES backgrounds commit to school and achieve success in learning when they participate in authentic and intellectually challenging activities (Newman 1996, 2004).

Current research in Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) schools indicates that participation impacts positively on student learning when the whole school has a strong focus on learning. Schools appeared to have greater improvements in behaviour as well as in student learning outcomes when they focused on improving student engagement in learning (Equity Programs Directorate 2004).

Recent research in PSFP primary schools confirms that participation can be seen as occurring on a number of levels. This could be described as small 'e' engagement where students are active participants or 'insiders' in their classrooms. On another level, described as big 'E' engagement, students make a long term commitment to learning and their educational future. They feel that 'school is for me' (Fair Go Team, In press).

Research on the reasons why students choose to leave school before completing Year 12 or the equivalent indicates that they dislike schooling rather than education (Smyth et al 2000). There are a complex range of reasons for this rejection including school culture, relationships with teachers and peers, teaching practices, the need to work, family and personal reasons (DETYA 2001, Lamb et al 2000).

Research also suggests that schools can provide many opportunities for students to participate in learning that is authentic and connected to significant issues. Students can engage in whole school decision making, student-led classroom activities and local school community initiatives (Thomson 2003).

What can PSFP schools do to improve students' participation?

Considering levels of student participation and engagement

The relationship students have with school, their level of participation and the degree to which they engage with the demands of the classroom may constantly shift and fluctuate due to various school and home factors. Student participation can function on a number of levels.

At Level 5 students

- respond to intellectual challenges in their selection of issues, texts, topics and subjects
- engage in substantive conversations with peers and teachers about their learning and submit detailed work that reflects independent, creative thinking and critical analysis
- display an eagerness to learn and experience long term satisfaction with their learning which leads to a sense that 'school is for me.'

At Level 4 students

- see learning as fun, interesting and are able to make connections with their learning in other contexts beyond the classroom
- are fired up by new ideas and concepts and prepared to rethink approaches to problem solving
- react positively and feel happy that their experiences, ideas and ambitions are respected, understood and incorporated into school life by teachers and other students.

At Level 3 students

- generally comply with the teacher's instructions and submit work on time to an acceptable standard
- are polite and punctual, complete most assignments and participate in a limited number of school activities
- find self-regulation and setting priorities difficult – they tend to require the teacher's assistance when a deadline is approaching for assignments to be completed.

At Level 2 students

- are mostly punctual and generally well prepared for school with books, pens and equipment
- display short term commitment to class activities, are often easily distracted by others during lessons and have difficulty completing tasks
- are very dependent on their teacher, frequently asking questions and needing close supervision to complete a task.

At Level 1 students

- have great difficulty attending school or class on a regular basis and are generally behind with their work
- feel school is not for them and has limited connection with their present and future lives
- engage in risky behaviours which ensure they are suspended from school or spend considerable time out of class on referral.

What can PSFP schools do to improve student participation and engagement in learning?

Schools can:

- ensure high expectations are held of all members of the school community
- develop a culture of achievement through a relentless focus on learning
- set targets, collect evidence and manage data to ensure students' participation outcomes improve and impact on student learning outcomes
- provide appropriate professional learning programs to develop whole school understandings about the importance of teaching practices that improve student participation in learning
- develop a culture in which all members of the school community work together to support participation as a means of improving student learning
- know and value the diverse communities and youth cultures which make up the local school community
- provide structures that allow students' voices to be heard in classrooms and at the whole school level
- organise flexible school structures in which students are able to genuinely participate in school
- provide a more appropriate learning environment and better co-operation between school and other agencies to support student learning.

Teachers can:

- use a wide range of teaching strategies to create a positive classroom culture in which students participate in learning that is of a high intellectual quality and connected to their lives
- use the NSW Quality teaching framework to reflect on teaching practices that support student participation in learning
- ensure that pedagogical choices are explicit and clearly articulate to students and their families what is to be learned and how it is to be learned and assessed
- provide constructive feedback and celebrate achievements with students and their families
- support students to complete a body of work that provides opportunities to practise new skills and reflect on their learning
- provide models of quality work and assessment practices so that students have a sense of what quality work is
- share decision-making about learning experiences with students and recognise that there are many ways in which they may demonstrate participation
- use co-operative classroom approaches to develop students' negotiation skills and capacity to work in teams
- design and implement a range of intervention strategies that effectively encourage disengaged students to attend and remain at school
- develop student and community-led initiatives that support student participation in learning and the community.

Parents and community members can:

- hold high expectations of their children and talk about learning at home and in the community with their children
- pass on information about school to other families in the community and encourage other families to become involved in the school community
- share their knowledge about their children with teachers
- share their knowledge about the local community and community cultures with the school staff
- support and value the work of students and teachers at all stages of schooling
- model active participation in the school community and decision-making processes
- become informed about current effective practice in teaching and learning
- access local community agencies to support student learning in the home.