Effective Strategies for Engaging a Kindergarten Classroom

by Carolina Funes Fedosenko
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INTRODUCTION

For many young children, kindergarten is their first experience in a formal classroom. Kindergartners typically have short attention spans and need to move around on a regular basis. They thrive in an interactive learning environment. When young children have an empowering experience in kindergarten, it helps them feel positive about school and socially and intellectually confident. Since kindergarten is the first year children enter the school system, this also means that a variety of children is coming in of which we often have no previous background knowledge or record on challenging behavior or learning disorders. This makes it difficult to guide teachers’ instruction and to prepare for decisions that will need to be taken in response to behavioral issues that may emerge. For this reason, kindergarten teachers may spend months without proper support and need to have knowledge on how to properly address behavioral challenges in the classroom, to ensure every student has a positive learning experience.
**Concrete Manipulatives:** physical objects that are used as teaching tools to engage students in hands-on learning.

**Differentiated Instruction:** pedagogical method that requires teachers to know how each student learns most effectively and tailor instruction and classroom assignments to meet those needs.

**Action Songs:** a children’s song that is sung, accompanied with specific actions.
KINDergarten: the first year in formal education (mckenna & strauser, 2010)

Kindergartners have only just begun their transition from simple to critical reasoning. Despite preschool experiences, kindergartners may be inexperienced at working in groups and may find it hard to exercise the self-discipline required in school settings. The simplest routines may need to be explicitly taught. Kindergartners often exhibit limited oral language development and may lack the basic academic vocabulary a student teacher might expect them to know. For example, they might be unfamiliar with words like directions, folder, marker, and line up. A few kindergartners may still struggle for independence in physical functions, such as using the toilet, operating zippers, and tying shoes. Because kindergarten presents contexts and concerns that differ significantly from those of the upper grades, it makes sense to focus on these differences when learning effective instructional strategies that engage students.

student engagement: why it matters (voke, 2002)

In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. Student engagement in the classroom is a factor reported to be critical in enhancing student achievement and increases chances of them performing well academically (Voke, 2002). Research shows that engaged students experience greater satisfaction with school experiences, which may in turn lead to greater school completion and student attendance rates, as well as lower incidences of acting-out behaviors. Researchers have also found that engaged students are more likely to approach tasks eagerly and to persist in the face of difficulty. They are also more likely to seek opportunities for
learning when the extrinsic awards are not available—for example, after formal schooling has been completed—positioning them to learn more over time than their disengaged classmates. Additionally, engagement is an essential prerequisite for the development of understanding, which makes it more likely that information will be retained and applied meaningfully in life. Therefore, as teachers we should have a wide variety of methods that we can use to increase engagement and be aware of the impact it can have on our students’ learning.

**HOW DO WE KNOW STUDENTS ARE ENGAGED?**

Even when teachers are applying strategies meant to keep students’ interest, we are not always sure if it is working. According to scholars, students who are engaged exhibit three characteristics: (1) they are attracted to their work, (2) they persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles, and (3) they take visible pleasure in accomplishing their work. Given the importance of student engagement and its benefits, teachers need to be able to check with their students and assess whether instruction is effectively engaging the class. The following are indicators to look for (Johnson, 2012):

*During instruction you will see students...*

- Paying attention (alert, tracking with their eyes)
- Listening (as opposed to chatting, or sleeping)
- Asking questions
- Responding to questions
- Following requests (participating)
- Reacting (laughing, crying, shouting, etc.)

*During the practice you will see students...*

- Writing and drawing, creating, planning, discussing, and asking questions
- Spending time on task and completing the work

The number of behavioral incidents during a lesson is also another useful indicator of the degree to which students are engaged. To summarize the descriptions above, engaged means
students are active. If true learning is to occur, then students have to be at the very least participating.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS DURING A LESSON

Young children tend to be curious, exploring, experimenting and motivated to learn. However, at that age children tend to be at a developmental age where attention span is shorter, together with the fact that kindergarten is often the first time most students are being exposed to the demands of formal education. So how do we teach in a manner that draws into their natural desire to learn and uses teaching methods that encourage, rather than dampen children’s enthusiasm?

1) **Use Concrete Manipulatives**: children learn best when they are given things and objects to learn with. This is because they benefit from multi-sensory experiences when learning new ideas and concepts (kindergarten-lessons.com). Use science materials like magnets, scales, weights, book characters and puppets to enhance literacy, and math materials such as pattern blocks, counting objects, and geometric blocks.

2) **Be Aware of Learning Differences**: Learning styles amongst children vary in many ways. Visual learners watch closely when you demonstrate an activity and like to draw and play with shapes and puzzles. Auditory learners understand ideas and concepts because they remember information they have heard, follow spoken directions well and remember songs easily. Although all children learn through touch, some learn especially well through touch and movement (tactile/kinetic learners).

Because the range of learning styles and academic abilities can vary so much from student to student, many kindergarten teachers use **differentiated instruction** (kindergarten-lessons.com). This method requires teachers to know how each student learns most effectively and tailor instruction and classroom assignments to meet those needs. For example, if a teacher has a visual learner in the classroom, she will need to model the assignment and demonstrate the concept that she's teaching. In other words, differentiated instruction provides students with several avenues to learn the same material, which increases the chance that each child will be successful.

3) **Present Activities in a Structured Step-by-Step Way**: When concepts are presented in a structured step-by-step process with each step building on previous knowledge, children learn with less effort (kindergarten-lessons.com). Organize the activities in a lesson along clear, easy-to-follow steps. Demonstrate each step, and provide a model whenever possible.
4) **Incorporate Music**: Using music to emphasize learning points entices children to be more connected to a lesson (Meier, 2014). Music can reinforce content and encourage interaction. For example, using a song to teach letters and sounds is a fun way to help students remember new information. Singing a song can help students understand vocabulary and grammar. Story songs with repeated phrases set to an interesting rhythm help children embrace new concepts without pressure. Music can provide a strong connection with language development and engage the senses of young children.

A meta-analysis of 30 studies conducted by Standley (2008) found that music activities that incorporate reading skills are significantly beneficial for helping children learn to read. The overall effect size of music enhance reading was strong compared to other meta-analysis on reading intervention. The incorporation of music instruction was most effective for students that struggled with reading. Also, effects were greatest in the kindergarten years, therefore using music to enhance reading should be provided in early childhood. Additionally, music is a great tool because it allows for repetition that is not perceived as drill.

5) **Get Them Moving**: Incorporating movement into core academic lessons like science or reading increases kindergarten children’s interest (Meier, 2014). Adding a physical component to a lesson helps students connect with the material and with one another. For example, reading a story to kindergartners and then having them use dramatic play to illustrate the main content points, enables children to become immersed in the lesson. Adding movement re-energizes the learning environment and adds fun to a lesson.

Incorporating movement can help students take a new interest in an academic subject they originally found tedious. A case study of a kindergarten classroom by Bischoff (2007) that looked at the effect of movement on engagement found that after adding movement to lessons, compared to the 13 students who did not like science in the pre-survey only 2 did not like science after the manipulation. Some students even specifically referred to the movements after saying they liked science. Participation during the lesson also increased significantly by introducing action. Previously about 8 to 9 students would not respond to questions, compared to only 3 students post-intervention. Students also were more likely to retain information by reflecting back to movements they did to learn facts. Therefore, changing a lesson by adding movement can strike a chord with some students, and encourage their desire to learn through these activities.

**Movement, Music & ELL students**

Researchers have found that implementing movement and music can be an efficient and effective method for improving language acquisition in ELL students. A study by Schunk (1999) found that introducing signs into second language rehearsal is beneficial for it provides visual cues and engages students in meaningful physical participation. The participants were 80 students between k-2 grade levels that attended language sessions in one of the following rehearsal conditions: sung text paired with signs, spoken text paired with signs, sung text, and a control group of spoken text only. What is noteworthy is that all signs conditions made significantly greater gains in vocabulary recognition that those in the control condition of spoken text only. Moreover, the
condition that displayed the largest improvement was that in which signing was paired with singing, indicating that there may be advantages to using a combination of the two for language acquisition. Therefore, an oral approach to additional language acquisition may be effectively supplemented by singing and signing.

Adding movement and music allows for a playful approach that provides a positive learning environment for ELL students that may already be stressed with the task of learning a new language. The children were also more motivated when allowed to sing and sign, as opposed to when they were expected to receive input passively (Schunk, 1999). Using songs and signs not only engages students in language development, but also is beneficial for ELL and non-ELL students alike for it allows to simultaneously target various prescribed learning outcomes. For example, while signing children work on both fine and gross motor skills. This means music and movement provide a more holistic learning experience for all students.

6) **Allow for Breaks**: Children need to be active, and well-planned interesting lessons fail if the children need a break. Taking lots of breaks throughout the day like going for walks around the school or jumping up and down gets the blood pumping and results in more alert students. Regular brain breaks enhance attentiveness, concentration and focus. They accelerate learning by allowing children to release their energy, anxiety and stress.

**Practical Application – Use of Action Songs**: these are brain break activities that make it easy and fun to take a quick energy break in the classroom. When children take a moment to sing, dance, move and even laugh, they can return to their academics feeling happy, energized and renewed.

**“Shake Your Sillies Out”** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwT5oX_mqS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwT5oX_mqS0) is one of the most widely known actions songs out there that children love.

**Lyrics**

We’re gonna shake, shake, shake our sillies out,
Shake, shake, shake our sillies out,
Shake, shake, shake our sillies out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

We’re gonna clap, clap, clap, our crazies out,
Clap, clap, clap our crazies out,
Clap, clap, clap our crazies out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

We’re Gonna jump, jump, jump our jiggles out,
Jump, jump, jump our jiggles out,
Jump, jump, jump our jiggles out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

We’re gonna jog, jog, jog our jitters out,
Jog, jog, jog our jitters out,
Jog, jog, jog our jitters out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

We’re gonna stretch, stretch, stretch our stretchies out,
Stretch, stretch, stretch our stretchies out,
Stretch, stretch, stretch our stretchies out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

We’re gonna yawn, yawn, yawn our yawnies out,
Yawn, yawn our yawnies out,
Yawn, yawn, yawn our yawnies out,
And wiggle our waggles away.

Repeat all, And wiggle our waggles away.
The following is a link to an online resource with a list of 20 action songs to choose from. Each title provides a link to a YouTube video that shows both the moves and lyrics:


Actions songs are best employed to increase student engagement in-between lessons, before afternoon lessons when energy tends to be low or strategically placed during a lesson when children are restless. Also, it is important to choose a song that best meets the situation’s needs.

TRANSITIONS: GETTING CHILDREN’S ATTENTION (SHELBY, 2009)

When instructing a kindergarten class, it is important to have ways of maintaining students engaged from one activity to the other. Planning ahead how to get students’ attention is easier than having to regain it once control of the situation has been lost. Many strategies can be used to help a child transition smoothly. The following are some tips for planning effective transitions:

1) **Getting Attention**: the first step in to be aware that young children have a remarkable focus on what they are already doing, and so attention signals need to be strong enough to get through their present concentration.

2) **Whatever the strategy, it is important to have children practice.** Keep practicing in the first week or two, and practice again if you see it has stopped working or if many children are not listening.

3) **Be clear and specific.** Children are more likely to hear your requests and pay attention when it is clear what you want them to do.

   ➔ **Keep directions short and simple**
   ➔ **Allow children to process your requests for their attention and follow the directions given.**
   ➔ Always give a 5 to 10 minute warning that the activity will end.
Consider that afternoons are low energy times for many children and it may take longer to process attention-getting techniques.

4) **Use one method consistently.** A method is much more likely to work if you commit to it 100%.

5) **Be sure all children know what is expected when these systems are used.** Individual guidance may be necessary for children who have difficulty with transitions. With consistency, the group will easily follow the routine when they hear the selected signal.

6) **Post the day’s schedule.** The schedule informs children of “What comes next”; this prepares them for upcoming transitions.

**Some examples of techniques are…**

- Use a clapping pattern; Clap or tap in a pattern, for example, clap slowly twice and then clap fast three times. The students are to stop what they are doing and repeat the pattern. If necessary, do it again until all children have responded and are quiet.

- When you say, "Voices," teach the children to respond with a quiet, "Shhh..." Use this if the children are too loud. If you want their attention, say, "Voices" again and they respond with a quieter, "Shhh..." Say it a third time very quietly, "Voices." All children should be quiet and ready to listen.

- When you say, “Eyes on me”, students are to respond, “Eyes on you”. This can be used to redirect attention towards you when you a message needs to be relayed.

- Use, "Teacher Says," like "Simon Says." For example, "Teacher says, touch your nose," “Teacher says, Clap once," then "Teacher says, look at me." This can also be used to line up! Teacher says, "Line Up!"

- For getting attention, you can: Shake a shaker, touch a wind chime, ring a bell, use a rain stick, play music or use any kind of sound maker as a signal for students to be attentive.

- Use the chant: **'BOOM CHICKA BOOM'!**

This chant can be used to facilitate classroom transitions. If your group/class is noisy, start chanting loudly, then lower your volume with each successive repetition. For the next-to-last time it is said, whisper the words. For the last repetition, only lip-sync or mouth the words.
BOOM CHICK BOOM!
I said a boom chicka boom
'Students repeat'
I said a boom chicka boom.
'Students repeat'
I said a boom chicka rocka
Chicka rocka, chicka boom
'Students repeat'
I said a boom chicka boom.
'Students repeat'
Oh yeah (echo), uh huh (echo), next time (echo)
A little softer (echo).
A little louder...
A little slower...
A little faster...
The end!!!

The following link is a useful resource that provides many more examples of techniques teacher can use to grab young students’ attention and to facilitate transitions and aid instruction:
http://www.kidactivities.net/category/transitions-attention-getting-strategies.aspx

THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM: A CHALLENGING MELTING POT

Given that kindergarten is the point of entry into the school system for the majority of students, there often is a lack of identification and planning necessary for students with special needs. Unfortunately, there is not a system in place for screening students and therefore they are not identified before the opening of the school year (Full day kindergarten in British Columbia, 2011). Additionally, it sometimes takes months for students to get appropriate support. As a result, kindergarten classrooms can have some serious behavior concerns in September, and for teachers to be the only adult to be responsible for the well-being of all the students can be an immense challenge. One of the main characteristics of behavioral challenging children tends to be frequent episodes of defiance from these students. These conditions hinder the learning environment of other students,
and limit the quality of instruction the teacher can provide.

ADDRESSING DEFIANCE (WILSON, 2013)

When children are defiant, their goal is not to annoy, disrespect, or frustrate us; but rather, often is to feel significant (Wilson, 2013). However, the students’ defiance also threatens the teacher’s need to feel significant, as well. This often results in a power struggle, which teachers can never win, since we lose as soon as we enter one. NO ONE wins a power struggle.

The best way to avoid power struggles and help a child who defies authority is to calmly work with him in ways that acknowledge his genuine need to feel significant. Also critical, is demonstrating that you still hold him (and everyone in the class) accountable for following the rules. And of course, it is best to help the child avoid defiance mode in the first place.

PREVENTING DEFIANCE

1) **Build a positive teacher-Student relationship**: This advice applies for all students, but is especially crucial for students that tend to act defiantly because they need to know that despite difficulties, we still will care about them. To build a strong relationship, remind yourself that all children have positive attributes. Make a point of learning about students; interests, and channel their talents in ways that foster their sense of significance.

2) **Reinforce progress and effort**: Make a point of noticing the child’s successes in following directions, transitioning smoothly, or doing anything that might ordinarily invite resistance. Reinforce the behavior by letting the child know you notices, but do it so privately to avoid comparison to other classmates. When possible, also note how the cooperative behavior helps the child and others.

3) **Channel children’s energy in positive directions**: Children who challenge authority are often quite adept at taking on bigger causes. Working on issues they consider important can help focus their energy and build their sense of significance.

DE-ESCALATING DEFIANCE

When a child is being defiant, you need above all to keep him (and his classmates) safe while giving him a chance to cool down. These **general guidelines** will help you and the child navigate episodes of defiance:

- Avoid doing anything that will heighten the child's stress and invite more resistance -Don't push buttons.
- Don't try to reason or make an emotional appeal to win the child over.
- Slow down. Waiting a few seconds (if safety allows) before you say or do anything lets the child regain her ability to cooperate and also lets you assess the situation calmly and objectively.
After an incident, reflect on what preceded it. Eventually, you'll begin to recognize the situations that set off the child's defiance, as well as the signs that he's becoming uncomfortable (such as opening and closing his fists or avoiding eye contact).

Following are some specific steps you can take to guide a child past active defiance:

1) **Intervene Early**: when you see the first signs that a child may become defiant, respond as soon as you can with respectful reminders and redirections. If we wait until the behaviour unfolds, the child may be less likely to respond rationally to directions. When doing this, remember to – Be brief, speak calmly and matter-of-factly, use short and direct statements, avoid questions, and keep body language neutral.

   Examples - If a student is challenging directions by standing up and yelling, quietly say: “Lily, take a seat. You can read or draw now.”

2) **Avoid negotiating in the moment**: Once a child has defied you, decide on a redirection or consequence and remain firm in your decision. Negotiating during the incident will invite further testing. If you do find yourself in a power struggle, take a deep breath and disengage. Let the child (and the whole class, if watching) know that you're finished talking for now and will address the issue after the child calms down.

3) **Give the child time and space**: Once you've given a reminder, redirection, or consequence, make sure the child follows it. But physically step back to give him more space—literally and emotionally. Doing so lessens the sense that you're trying to control him. A child who struggles to follow directions often needs a minute or two to decide what to do. If you insist on immediacy, he may automatically resist.

It's easy to feel angry, irritated, or frustrated when children defy us. But when we find ways to rise above our own feelings, we can continue to appreciate our students and guide them beyond defiance. As a result, we grow as teachers, while offering the children a path to success and a model of how to get along in the world.
CONCLUSION

Given the nature in which the education system is set up and the young age of the students, kindergarten can be a challenging class to teach. However, young children can be imaginative, curious and explorative, and their first exposure to formal education can really influence the tone of their future learning. As teacher, we have a responsibility to harness their natural willingness to learn through engaging instructional practices. Children should be active during the learning process. A teacher can also develop their lessons according to the students in the class by observing patterns in engaging behavior. Having an arsenal of strategies to facilitate transitions and interactions with defiant behavior will also go a long way in making learning more efficient with such young students.

This article explores a case study led by a kindergarten teacher on the ways to increase her students’ engagement in science, a subject they had voted as least favourite. The author noted that adding actions to her science lessons led to a significant increase in their interest during the lesson, and was also useful in helping them retain information. This source is helpful to ground the argument the importance of introducing movement into lessons for kindergarten.


This document reviews 12 cases from British Columbia’s classrooms on the implementation of full-day kindergarten. The authors discuss many of the things that work, and also some of the difficulties that continue to exist. This is a useful source for looking at some of systematic challenges of the kindergarten classroom that teachers have to face.


This online source discusses teaching methods for kindergarten teachers meant to encourage children to learn and to feed off their natural enthusiasm and curiosity. The article offers three teaching practices based on the use of concrete materials, differentiated instruction, and step-by-step instruction. The authors also discuss the importance of providing students with break in order to increase productivity. This source is very helpful for providing concrete strategies for kindergarten teachers to keep students engaged.


Based on the results to a study of 1,500 classrooms that showed that 85% of them had less than 50% of students engaged, the author makes the argument for the importance of assessing whether students are engaged. He offers a list of signs to look for both during teacher-directed learning and student-directed learning. The author argues that while most teachers are able to pick on these cues, and try to make their lectures more interesting to increase students’ interest, lectures are still a passive way for students to learn. Therefore, to increase engagement students need to be active during lessons and be responsible for their own learning. This source is helpful to ground an argument for knowing when students are engaged, and how to do so.
Learning Station. (2013). 20 Brain break action songs: Let’s move!  

This website offers explains what action songs are and their value in a classroom with young children. According to the authors, brain break action songs increase academic productivity and ensure the students’ well-being. This source is helpful in explaining the purpose of action songs, and provides 20 concrete examples to choose from.

SRATE Journal, 19(2), 60.

In this article the authors discuss some of the challenges that teacher candidates can specifically face when working in a kindergarten class, and then offers specific tips to keep in mind when doing the practicum. The authors arranged the suggestions in ascending order of importance and are based on their many years of experience in working with the young students of a kindergarten class. This article is helpful to ground the discussion on the challenges of working with a kindergarten class and some of the things in mind when leading instruction.


This online article provides some useful strategies for keeping kindergarten students during a lesson. It is a good source for practical tips that are based on the fact that young children have a short attention span and thrive in interactive learning environments. Some main methods explored are the use of music and movement.


This article looked at how engaging students in meaningful movement through signing helped ELL students through language acquisition. The study found that language development was greatest in conditions that use signs, especially when paired with music. This is a valuable source for grounding the argument on the value of incorporating movement and music into instruction for all children, especially ELL students.


This online article offers helpful tips and concrete examples on strategies that could be used to get young students’ attention and facilitate transitions. It operates under the notion that if we
have such tools, instruction becomes more efficient and it helps students throughout the day. The author advocates for the importance of practicing these strategies with the class, being clear of the expectations, and firm with their use.


This meta-analysis explores the use of music as an effective intervention strategy for improving reading ability in students. The authors argue that music enhance reading is best used on young children and at-risk students. The source is useful for grounding an argument on the use of music as part of instruction for a kindergarten class.


This article reviews the body of research on student engagement and then provides a comprehensive overview of what entails student engagement, its benefits, and some of the school environment characteristics that facilitate the process of children becoming engaged with their education. The author also discusses some of the factors that could hinder student engagement, such as the extra time needed from the teacher to plan lessons, and not enough knowledge on each student in order to adapt the lesson plans. This source was a useful for helping me define student engagement, and to identify why it is important to make sure student are engaged


This valuable article argues that the main driving force behind a student’s defiance is their need to feel significant, and therefore acknowledging this need is important. However, it is also important to never engage in the power struggle and to establish that you hold them, as well as all students, accountable for following the rules. The author offers preventive strategies, followed by strategies to address an episode of defiance once it takes place. This source is very helpful for providing practical information to keep in mind when dealing with these difficult situations as teachers.