



Strategies to Support a Positive School Climate

Skills-Challenge

Skills-challenge, or instructional challenge, refers to the balance between a students' level of skill and the challenge of their schoolwork.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) used the term "flow" to describe the state when a person is deeply engaged in an activity that is intrinsically interesting. He maintained that this occurs when there is a balance between the challenge inherent in a task and the skills required to accomplish it. In the school setting, students are most engaged when they are presented with challenging tasks and feel they have the skills to accomplish them



Why is it important?

- People learn best when they are working on tasks that are both challenging and of deep interest to them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
- Students with high skills and low challenge tend to find school boring and of little relevance (Willms et al., 2009).
- Students with low skills and high challenge are almost twice as likely to experience anxiety as their peers with high skills who experience high levels of challenge (Tramonte & Willms, 2010).
- Students with low engagement and low academic skills are at an increased risk of dropping out of school (Bagnell et al., 2008).

In Practice

By pairing academic intensity with positive emotional responses students are more likely to experience flow and high engagement (Shernoff et al., 2003; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).



What can schools do?

School leaders can support flow-inducing experiences by guiding educators to structure their lessons accordingly.

- Encourage challenges that remain one moderate step beyond a student's current abilities.
- Instruct educators to provide choice within lessons in order to give a sense of autonomy, enhance perceptions of control and bolster student confidence.
- Ensure curricular relevance by reminding teachers to associate learning tasks with each student's personal goals and interests.
- Advise staff to prioritise immersive individual and group learning experiences over lectures and assessments, as meaningful tasks can enhance intrinsic joy for students.



In the Classroom

Teachers can further create conditions for flow in the classroom by:

- Setting effective short-term goals that break down a task step-by-step so that students can clearly understand what needs to be accomplished.
- Offering immediate, personalised feedback to enable students to appropriately adjust their approach.
- Providing optimal challenges that take a students' current range of skills into consideration, scaffolding when necessary.

Beyond these considerations, by minimising distractions in the classroom educators can promote the concentration and focus needed to achieve a flow state (Liljedahl, 2016).

References

- Bagnell, A., Tramonte, L., & Willms, J. D. (2008). *The prevalence of significant mental health problems among Canadian youth and their comorbidity with cognitive and health problems*. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.
- Liljedahl, P. (2016). *Flow: A framework for discussing teaching*. In *Proceedings of the 40th Conference of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education* (Vol. 3, pp. 203-210). PME.
- Shernoff, D. J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Shneider, B., & Shernoff, E. S. (2003). Student engagement in high school classrooms from the perspective of flow theory. *School Psychology Quarterly, 18*(2), 158-176.
- Shernoff, D. J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). Flow in schools: Cultivating engaged learners and optimal learning environments. In R. C. Gilman, E. S. Heubner, & M. J. Furlong (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology in schools* (pp. 131-145). Routledge.
- Tramonte, L., & Willms, J. D. (2010). The prevalence of anxiety among middle and secondary school students in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health, 101*(Suppl.3), S19-S22.
- Willms, J. D., Friesen, S., & Milton, P. (2009). What did you do in school today? *Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*. (First National Report) Canadian Education Association.