

A Case Study on Increasing Student Engagement

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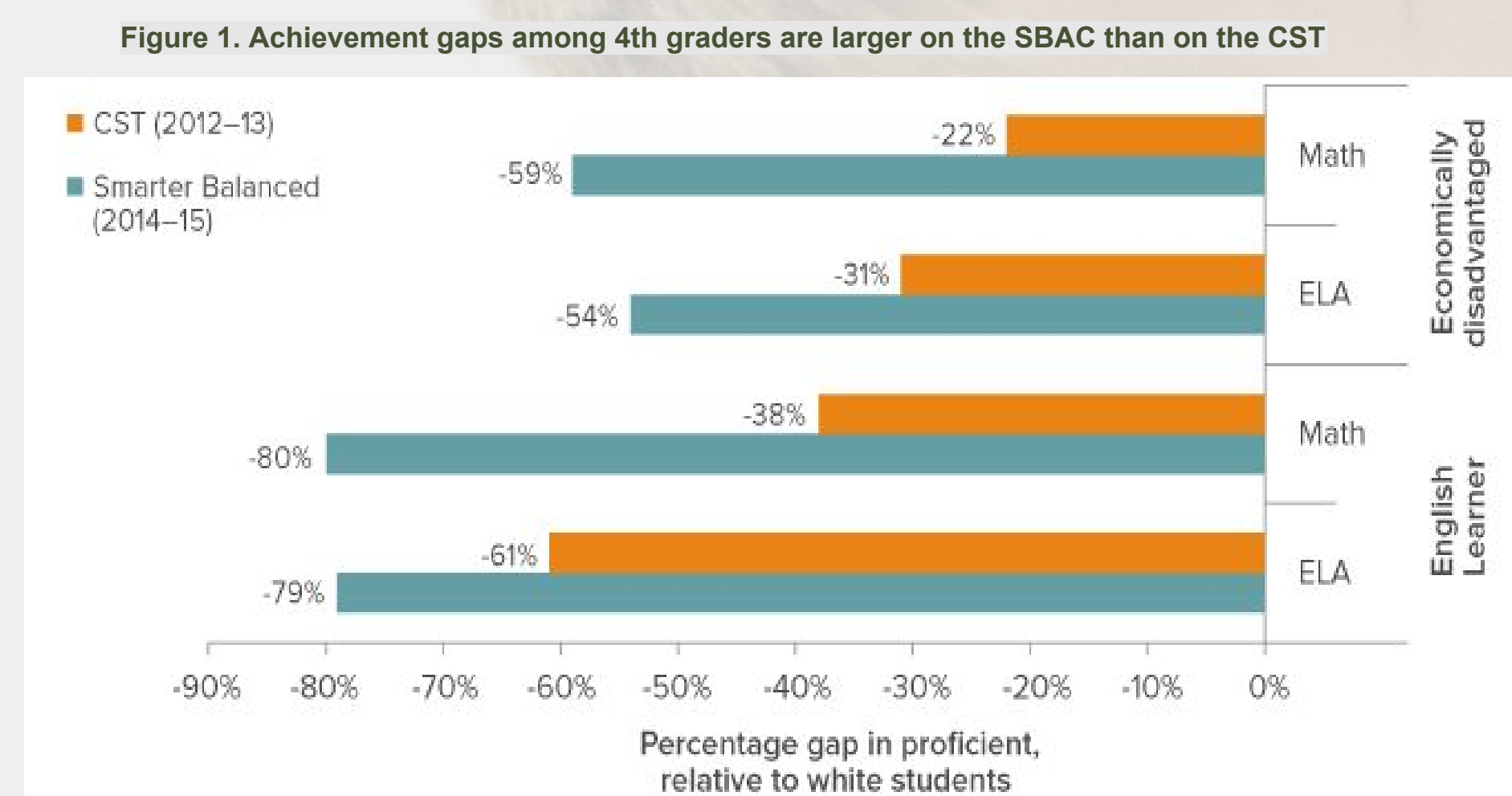
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Introduction

This study examined a third grade classroom in a dual immersion school (Spanish-English). It included two students; one male and one female with similar backgrounds. Both students were considered English Learners (EL). Each was chosen due to of lack of participation in class. The goal was to discover a student pathway to a new found sense of confidence and belonging in classroom community with the hope that might increase classroom participation rates and sense of belonging to a group of his/her peers. Results showed great insight to what hinders these particular students from participating in class. Two noteworthy findings of the study were that, one: a basic yet intentional observation of a classroom can provide great insight of student participation behavior. Two, taking the time to talk one on one with students can provide a teacher with more information than what one would expect.

Background and Need

The following graph (Figure 1) demonstrates how the achievement gap is only increasing for English Learners.



In the Napa Valley Unified School District, it is the goal to have *all* students college and career ready. Closing the achievement gap is imperative in NVUSD; their student population is 54% Hispanic or Latino. To accomplish this goal NVUSD not only implements the CCSS (2010), but they also implement 21st century skills known as the 4 C's (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication) in every classroom. It is expected that all students learn how to think critically and creatively as well as collaborate and communicate with their peers. In order for a student to even attempt one of these skills, it is necessary for the student to feel that their classroom is a safe place to express thoughts and ideas. When students learn how to collaborate and feel safe to do so, their participation in class increases along with motivation to learn.

Results

The driving question for this study was: *How can all students be included in classroom community?* The purposive sample was two students, who will be referred to as Alex and Alina, were observed in three different settings: working in a small group of peers, independent work time, and during one on one meetings with researcher. These students were chosen because for most of the school year they seldom willingly participate in academic classroom discussion, community circles, or in small group settings. They generally do not speak in class unless being spoken to. After seeing the initial questionnaire results it was interesting to see what both students had marked in common. They both viewed themselves as good students but lacking academic confidence:

Alina: "I am a good student but I need a lot of help in math."

Alex: "I am okay but I am not good in reading in English and I need help in math."

It was obvious that the students were very aware of their shortcomings in school and not so much aware of what their strengths are in school. When asked what are they were good at in school, both had the same answer: "I don't know."

Sample observations

Early during this three week study, when the whole class was asked to gather together on the carpet area, the female student, Alina, kept a large distance between herself and the class. When she was asked to come closer, the student did not say anything and decided to sit closer but directly behind another student as if she was trying to hide.

The teacher/researcher observed that the male student, Alex, had no problem physically joining the class or small group. Although he was a silent participant most of the time, he seemed to enjoy being around others. He would look at the person who was talking and would laugh when others would laugh. It seemed as if he enjoyed being with his peers. He would only speak up when his thoughts were solicited. When he would share, his volume was always low and his words were few. This was very interesting to the researcher because during small group project time the students were to all speak in Spanish, the male student's primary language.

In the first week of observation, it was noted that the female student was crying at her desk, while the other three group members were on the carpet area of classroom working on the group task. When the researcher approached the student and asked what happened the student answered: "I don't think they want me in their group. They do not need my help."

Knowing the other students in the group, the teacher/researcher knew this was not the case. The other members were simply engaged in their task. The researcher took that event as a teaching moment and reminded the group of their individual group member roles and what exactly they entail. Everyone has a role or a job to help the project move along. The Alina's role was the material manager. Her job was to make sure that the group had all the supplies they needed. However, she was not aware of what to do when her job was completed, and the rest of the team members were so engaged in the project that they did not notice her absence. She did not know how to rejoin the team. The teacher then followed with, regrouping the group so the Alina could hear that they did not mean to exclude her, and they would do a better job of making sure she is included. The teacher then equipped Alina with a few sentences that could help her do her part in joining the group, if she were to ever feel like that again.

Data Analysis: An unexpected result from this study was that, through having several one-on-one meetings with Alex and Alina, the teacher was able to get to know students on a more personal level. In addition to gaining classroom behavior insight, the teacher gained an insight to the home life of these students. On top of dealing with poverty issues these students were dealing with things like sibling teenage pregnancy, witnessing verbal spousal abuse, teenage siblings being incarcerated, and some neglect. These two students also shared in common that they were both the youngest in their families, and because of the major issues just mentioned, not a lot of attention had been given to them.

Literature cited

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Conclusions

By the end of the study, the observation data revealed evidence that not only did Alex and Alina need explicit teaching on how to work in a group, but the rest of the students also needed guidance on how to include people and exactly how to be peer teachers to each other. Teaching someone does not mean doing the work for the person while they watch. Sometimes it means being patient and watching a member explore something new. Sometimes it means asking questions to each other and waiting patiently for answers.

The findings revealed that ELLs, although they may be silent, are still participants. They, too, can be contributors to the classroom with adequate guidance, acceptance, and respect from peers and teachers.

It is evident that the examination of classroom dynamics through simple but yet intentional observation is essential for facilitating the most effective classroom for all students. The driving question for this study was: *How can all students be included in classroom community?* The study explored this question, and the results indicate that there is no one answer that works for all ELLs. Each student is individual, and teachers must make an effort to know each one. In discovering what looks like to be the beginning of the answers to these questions, the students did not make strides in the area of participating but perhaps feel better equipped to participate in the future because of this study. While the present study provided important information on these particular students, there continues to be a need on further research on the topic of English Language Learners. They struggle with more than just a language barrier. The class that these students were in was in Spanish. ELLs can add so much to classrooms. They can help other students be more compassionate towards people's differences, not only culturally but personally. As teachers, no matter the subject, the greatest lesson to teach is to be respectful and compassionate of others.

Further information

Contact Karla at ksilva@nvusd.org
For information on this project and other related projects visit learninginnovationlab.com

