How to Improve Student Engagement through Relationship Building

Action Research Proposal

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Introduction

As a new teacher in the virtual classroom, it is hard to engage students and build relationships with students in a virtual class. Instructors often have numerous students which can cause them to miss small things and see nonverbal communication from students without speaking to garner attention, especially when the students all have their video cameras off. The characteristics of this study will discuss the issue of student engagement and how lack of relationship interferes with the students learning and teacher-student connection. It is important to be aware of body language, voice intonations and nonverbal communication. I will examine the action research question - How to improve student engagement through relationship building. Teaching is a skill and career that requires patience, dedication, interaction, and a great deal of care. I always seek to aid students by improving their talents and building their confidence. It is challenging to make students comfortable in a virtual setting and join in scientific or mathematical discussion.

Nevertheless, in a virtual classroom setting with multiple students, you can see and hear the students as you observe their behavior. The children may interact with one another as well as the instructor. You hear their voices, which may often be enhanced by the chat. This is like someone thinking out loud and it is multimodal to some degree. All this is information is used by our human capacity for understanding interaction. Often classes are more interesting when everyone participates in the discussion out of excitement and exuberance (Blum, 2020). It is my goal to use action research to be more cognizant when students relate with social cues only rather than verbally during class and to connect with students by engaging them through relationship building. These include eye contact, facial expressions and voice inflection etc.

How can a teacher improve student engagement through relationship building? Defining what relationship building looks like to me includes three separate terms - communication, response, connection between teacher and student. Communication is an open forum to express how one feels. This can be verbal, it can be written, or expressed in nonverbal ways. Not everyone communicates in the same way and some students communicate by not showing who they are and by not speaking at all. The lack of communication shows very distinct differences in students. The two groups can emerge with these distinct differences where one is genuinely shy of being on camera the other is hiding and perhaps playing video games in the background. These social cues are important when determining how to communicate with your students.

Response is defined as a reaction to a question, experience, or some other type of stimulus. There is no relationship between two people if one person does not respond, react, or interact to the other person. A response will denote a type of student engagement. In our virtual learning environment students can respond a few different ways. The first includes taking themselves off mute and speaking. The second way is typing in the chat box and the third way, by nodding their head to be seen while their video camera is on or perhaps giving a thumbs up.

Consequently, connection between the student and the teacher is a social response that develops overtime. Connecting over virtual learning has proven to be challenging when classes are from 20 to 30 students in number. Some students connect better when there is a small group like in our content support at 2:45 pm Monday through Thursday. Some students are open to sharing their culture and their favorite things on the screen. These students are easier to make a connection with as they have more social skills and are more open to virtual learning.

During the early part of the semester, students were not turning on their cameras for class each day. I was speaking to a blank screen that was full of letters. It was very difficult to elicit any

response from the student's weather asking questions or even taking attendance. I knew that I was not going to be able to continue the entire year teaching and speaking to myself in the virtual classroom setting. So, I began to come up with ways to have students communicate, respond and connect with me.

Furthermore, as teachers we were instructed to have the students turn on their cameras, but students would not comply with this request. I began to wonder what was going on, if the students were even understanding what I was speaking of, or if the content was understood correctly. With turned in assignments averaging 30%, I began to believe that the students were not paying attention at all in class. The question was how do you get students to respond? I began to spark conversations around the lesson and asked science-based questions to the students. Literary techniques were part of what the administration wanted to include in our lesson plans on a weekly basis. The middle school implemented a writing assignment on Wednesday. Using the strategy students were to write answers to content area questions to improve the literacy of our students in our school. The reading level of the 6th grade students is at a fourth-grade level according to their Lexile scores. However, with so many assignments not turned in, I was unable to gauge the effectiveness of this technique. 70% of my students did not participate in turning you in lessons. The analysis of this data quickly showed that another strategy was needed in order to focus on building a relationship with my students and engage them in classroom activities.

To build rapport with the students, I began implementing five minutes to check in to see how they were doing, on the suggestion from a colleague. Allowing students to talk about their morning and other things that were important to them, began to bring out conversations from the students. The relationships began to build, and certain students began to become more comfortable in talking with me. My initial thoughts circled around developing a community of learners where

encouragement was the center and supporting individual uniqueness was accepted. Hubert (2014) takes into consideration the student perspective of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Students who had experience CRP in mathematics classrooms were interviewed; Hubert (2014) found at the conclusion of her study the students had an "improved attitude and/or interests towards learning. The creation of a home environment in the classroom concept gives the students a sense of belonging in the classroom. When a caring teacher who is encouraging, supportive and positively affirming, students feel the love and support of that teacher and the other students. When you feel like family, the performance in the classroom can be enhanced. "Continually encouraging the classroom culture of acceptance of differences shared cultural experiences, an excellence in learning, I feel, increase the student confidence to join in/engage the scientific discussion (Journal Entry 3, Week 6)."

Context

The subject of this study addresses a Middle School Grade Level 6 in an online virtual environment using a virtual learning platform. The students and the action researcher teacher are in their home environment. The demographic I work with is in an area that consists of predominately underprivileged children, 55% boys and 45% girls (http://www.rockdaleschools.org/), from low-income, single parents households. Some students deal with struggles due to learning disabilities. Most of my students are African American and Latinx, and the language barrier surprisingly does not hinder the Latinx students. I work constantly to help the African American children overcome their struggles with misconceptions. This school is in suburban Georgia and is a Title 1 school that is diverse and there are concentrations of children with single parents. Title I, Part A funds, are earmarked to improve educational programs students

and ensure economically and socially disadvantaged students receive equal opportunity for access to a quality education (www.thebestschools.org).

A classroom culture of behavioral norms has been established since the first day of school. These norms include cameras on, microphones muted, raising hands, waiting to be called on, respect of yourself, and others, kind words to be spoken and behavior appropriate for school. The principle has established family center culture or students are called scholars and parents are involved in the student's education. A culture of excellence and caring is mixed in with academic achievement as together we seek to improve the scores of the middle school.

I do not need permission to conduct this action research project, because I am conducting the research within my own classroom and to improve my individual teaching practices. I do not plan to share any results outside of my coursework and I am staying within my sphere of influence to affect positive change and improve student learning and personal praxis. All communication with students happens virtually on the laptops issued by the District. Any future contact with parents would be via email notification only. Contacting parents would also give me some insight as to whether the children are receiving parental assistance while studying.

Review of Literature

Throughout my first year as a provisional teacher, I have come to notice what Aspelin addresses in research that demonstrates that supportive teacher student relationships have multiple positive educational effects. Drawing chiefly on T. Shibutani, but also on G.H. Mead and T. Scheff, the article aims to: (i) examine how the teacher–student relationship is constructed through nonverbal communication and (ii) discuss the implications regarding teachers' relational competence in situated teaching (Aspelin, 2017). Student engagement may be affected by what

Blum describes the effect of "continually repressing my lifelong, trained habit of uttering simultaneous encouragement" through human gestures and "continuers' (Blum 2020)". These gestures that promote understanding of the speaker, in this case the student, do not work on the virtual learning platform where it is designed for one person to speak at a time.

Students who are suffering through this pandemic have what Hu, Jia, Plucker and Shan describes as a "common motivational problems" within my science classroom; "lack of innovative spirit, practical ability…an increase in student weariness, a dislike of school, and a lack of learning motivation" (2016, p. 70). My concern is related to the motivational aspect and weariness found within these problems and the solution that building relationships can bring. Using my own self-reflective practices, I find that as a science teacher, I can only control my methods and strategies of how I facilitate a positive learning environment. Thus, I have decided to focus on how to increase student engagement through relationship building. The strategies incorporate class discussions centered around human intrinsic skills that contribute to students' abilities to communicate and connect critical skills while learning content from units of the 6th grade Georgia science standards.

"When a classroom (aims for doesn't always achieve democratic authoritarian conversation, rather than orchestrated teacher centered pedagogy, all the tools of human interaction are recruited (Blum, 2020)." As I look for ways to have appropriate forms of engagements in the classroom and bring that in line with learning as examined by Blum, the frustration of my student's performance and the lack of relationship must be analyzed more deeply. This is also supported by research done by Hajhosseini, Madani, Shabanan and Zandi that accounts for the social integration affects that my class discussions could have on students, making it a connection between students and

teachers that expands out beyond the classroom environment, especially within settings where that isn't the norm (2016).

Students are subjected to online learning and increased screen time for reading and learning. In a recent New York Times article, researchers point out that popular self-paced "brain training" programs have not been demonstrated to improve performance in school or work (DeSteno, BreaZeal, & Harris, 2017). They attribute the problem to a lack of ability to see social cues in online teaching. This includes facial expressions and voice inflections, which are a fundamental part of human interaction and normal relationships. This fact tends to be lost on online course developers in higher education. "Most course developers default to text communication when developing their online content basically transcribing what they would normally say in a face-to-face lecture and assigning readings as outside resources (Orlando, 2017)."

If I am to facilitate changes that provide students the opportunity to grow within the classroom, my focus needs to be centered around my own ability to adapt and change based on the needs of my students (Mills, 2018). There has been a large amount of research done on the way students influence one another via students' perception of one another on a conscious and subconscious level (Thomas & Mueller, 2017). Students influence and learn from each other; this is looked at as a motivational influence that teachers can constructively build upon by encouraging student autonomy (Thomas & Mueller, 2017). Research shows that using student interest to promote the classroom environment has beneficial effects on individual students if the collective perception of autonomy is shared among most students in the classroom (Thomas & Mueller, 2017). This autonomy that is spoken of relates to my action research because it takes into account the teacher's ability to promote and carry out tasks that support individuality, encouraging students

to building awareness and growth, and using avenues such as class discussions, praises and presentations to develop relationship in the virtual classroom environment.

Data Collection

Initially, I began collecting data on how many students have their cameras on. Also, how many students spoke including who would read aloud. It was easy to connect with the students who had their cameras on which could be zero to two initially for each class. When a student did participate in the conversations or answer questions, I begin celebrating their responses whether they were right or wrong. I would always say to the students to give the student a hand clap for being brave enough to speak on camera. I would also encourage the student when they would read or really try hard to answer a question. Ladson Billings reported that many of the teachers hired in lower class schools have unimaginative teaching, low expectations, and are using substandard textbooks. Studies show that when there are opportunities to improve a child's experience in school, we can improve or reverse the outcome of his slash her life. I began to treat the students as competent to increase the likelihood of compliance as (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

Finally, I then began collecting data on what types of activities gave the students opportunities to participate in the discussion. The list includes engaging laboratory, "Talk Moves" by Page Keeley, and acknowledging social cues. Saying good morning to students, as opposed to just calling the roll which did not work well at all in the virtual setting, was implemented.

Data Sources

Data charts give account of the number of students who raise hands, who spoke, who turned on their cameras, who said good morning, and who ask questions. Students who come to content support are more likely to turn on their cameras on, have conversations with me about what they

need. I can assist them in small groups. Many who never speak in class are more comfortable speaking during that time. I will also gather statistics on the percentages of students that deal with the negative consequences of misread social cues. I will have also reviewed studies of the effects of how social cues aids students in overcoming struggles with learning. I have triangulated this data by gathering information from multiple sources (Mills, p. 139) established within the data collection, observation and visual methods.

Additionally, I did "consult more qualitative oriented references such as Mills" data collection techniques to help me reach my conclusion (Mills, p. 110). It is important to review statistics to know how often social cues are missed when students raise their hands, speak, type in the chat box or turn on their cameras during scientific conversations. It also gives you an estimate of the children that feel they must communicate via specific modes.

Data Analysis

Analyzing the themes and patterns of the preliminary data show inconsistency of student engagement based on the frequency and type of communication. Some days are quitter than others. This could happen more on Monday mornings or perhaps after a school break. Students are more likely to turn on their cameras when others are turning on their camera. One theme that emerged is greater engagement when the entire class can participate virtually. Singing Happy Birthday to a student who announces their birthday draws the most open expression verbally and in the chat. As I stated in my Journal, students who have never spoken or come on camera, show their face and expressed happy birthday classmate. While the music was playing, some of the students danced and smiled in class for the first time. I have concluded the students love to celebrate each other in a positive manner.

The theme of connecting findings to personal experience emerged from the data connecting engagement to unbiased encouragement. Celebration is implemented into our classroom community to increase engagement is by giving a hand clap to those who volunteer to answer questions or read aloud during class in front of everyone. Students are congratulated whether they get the answer correct or not. Building confidence is a positive way to build relationships. When students know they are supported in their learning efforts by the teacher a stronger connection is built when students know the teacher cares.

Nevertheless, future changes to data collection methods should be observed and implemented in order not to show bias of myself, the action researcher, of camera on or faces that are not shown. For this reason, I will not offer more interpretation of data. Children may be shy or embarrassed to speak in a group and work better with one on one assistance. I propose using individual experiences from survey questions asked to various participants. I will also gather statistics on the percentages of students that deal with the negative consequences of misread social cues. I will also review studies of the effects of how social cues aids students in overcoming struggles with learning. I will triangulate this data by gathering information by multiple sources.

The question to be answered is how I can, as a teacher, consistently increase student engagement through relationship building strategies. A survey will give more insight to how children are affected by virtual learning differently than a traditional classroom setting. Specific strategies to determine what builds a deeper relationship and a better connection between teacher and student will be implemented.

Action Plan

I plan to make the following changes to my virtual classroom, action research based on the themes that emerged. The research will be directly to enhance the internet classroom teaching and learning experience.

- The action plan includes continued implementation of relationship building techniques. Taking photos of the Gallery two - three times a week, reviewing the videos recordings, and noticing the missed social cues to improve student and teacher connection opportunities.

- Having students read aloud the weekly learning targets, PowerPoint content, or the McGraw Hill textbook will increase engagement in the classroom. Using technology programs to improve engagement during instruction. Plans also include implementing a reward system for participation in class between class periods. The students suggested a dance party at the end of class.

- An intent listening on for social cues and what is happening when with the student voice inflection. Listening for the stress of the student and the frustration of the students, and fear in the voice of the student will assist me in improving his student engagement and building relationships.

A lesson learned from listening intently to the voices of students, as if they were standing face to face, has helped me to connect with the, and offer understanding words of comfort and direction to the student's challenges. I can offer explicit instruction to clear up misconceptions in the science and mathematics lessons that I teach. This will be correlated to the data collected from test scores and assignments submitted to allow reflection on the impact of my action research on teaching and learning.

The second lesson learned is that mandated disciplinary requirements of turning on the cameras does not work and is not affective when students are in their home environment. Administration and other stakeholders can instruct teachers to insist students turn on cameras or insist students participate. However, it is still at the discretion of the students when they are not being monitored by a parent if they turn their cameras on or not. However, when parents are contacted based on inconsistent submission of assignments through email or by a phone call, shifts can be made in the attentiveness of the student to the lesson. The action plan will include emailing parents through the system called REMIND on a regular basis to stay connected and to build a relationship with the parents so that they would assist me in making this virtual learning environment life that we are living better for all stakeholders.

In conclusion, the greatest lesson that was learned is that student engagement can directly be dependent on the actions and interactions with the teacher. What that means is that a new teacher must be consistent and on her a game 100% of the time. The responsibility for overcoming some of the inherent problems associated with teaching in an online environment must rest with the teacher (Mills, 2018, p. 248). Your classroom is going to reflect the loving caring attitude and energy of the teacher most of the time. Students will respect you when they feel respected.

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Appendix

A. Data Charts

B. Laboratory Example

C. Photos

D. Show and Tell

E. Uncovering Student Ideas / Keeley probes

F. Phase Two Data Charts

A. Data Chart Samples

Data Charts

Preliminary Data

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Middle School Classes

PERIOD 3   10:10 AM

WEEK 5 Incidence Scale	Monday 9/21/20	Wednesday 9/23/20	WEEK 6	Monday 9/28	Wednesday 9/30	Content Support Small Groups	Totals
Strategy or Tool Used for Engagement:				Video Lab	Neaded Lab Live		
Cameras On	2	1		1	3	0	7
Conversation Participants	1	2		1	4	III	11
Conversations without prompting	1	0		3	Lab Shop Harmer Father 3	1	5
Chat Conversations	3	2		6	7	0	18
Good morning Replies	3	2		1	2	—	8
Readers	N/A	1		N/A	N/A	—	1
Daily Notes by Teacher:	Saying Girl to Group.	Very Quietly		Students ran down on to ask for help.	Student opted to turning camera on. Lab is Engaging		

Attendance   20   20   24   21

Data Charts

Preliminary Data

Valena Spencer

Middle School Classes

PERIOD 3   10:10Am morning

WEEK 9 Incidence Scale	Monday 10/19	Wednesday 10/21	WEEK 10	Monday 10/26	Wednesday 10/28	Content Support Small Groups	Totals
Strategy or Tool Used for Engagement:	Show + Tell Aloud			Review	Test		
Cameras On	IIII	5		IIII	4	0	16
Conversation Participants	5	5		HHT	3	0	18
Conversations without prompting	III	2		II	0 only howdy get to test	0	7
Chat Conversations	HHT I 6	10		~5	8	1	30
Good morning Replies	2	5		3	2	—	12
Readers	1	—		1	—		2
Daily Notes by Teacher:	Discussion & partic. Show & Tell Participate	Offer Extra Credit to Join in Speech Students wanted Elegated.		Lots of Prompting	Testing Day Asked to type in Chat	Students Won't connate tonyage	

Attendance   and 19   21   22
Developed
Relationships.
Helps

PERIOD 4   12:10pm

	Monday	Wednesday	WEEK 6	Monday	Wednesday	Content Support Small Groups	Totals
WEEK 5 Incidence Scale	9/22/20	9/24/20		9/29	10/1		
Strategy or Tool Used for Engagement:				NearPod 12	Live Lab Gravity		
Cameras On	2	3		2	0	III	10
Conversation Participants	4	5		IIII	HIT III	III	25
Conversations without prompting	5	6		IIII+	HIT II	IIII	22
Chat Conversations	3	.4		I	HIT	I	14
Good morning Replies	2	3		3	←	—	8
Readers	N/A	N/A		Teacher	N/A		0
Daily Notes by Teacher:	Attendance 23 Off Subject	Attendance 20 Off Subject Conversation.		Attendance 23 How do I get students to engage with?	Attendance +924 Need to intro Relationship Building Techniques		

and focus their comment on Science + class Conversations... Asked to Raise hands. and mute background noise

PERIOD 4   12:10pm After Lunch

WEEK 9 Incidence Scale	Monday 10/21/20	Wednesday 10/29/20	WEEK 10	Monday 11/27/20	Wednesday	Content Support Small Groups	Totals weekly
Strategy or Tool Used for Engagement:							
Cameras On	HIT II	HIT III		LHT I	LHT	III	29
Conversation Participants	LHT II	LHT SHT		IHT	LHT	IIII	31
Conversations without prompting	III	I		IIII	III	III	14
Chat Conversations	LHT LHT	HIT IIII		8	10		37
Good morning Replies	IIII	IIIII 5		IIII	IIII	IIII	21
Readers	TTTT II	III		HHTI	III	II	20
Daily Notes by Teacher:	Excited to talk about what they did on break	Students Var qtalkative Need Time Limits		Had more Content to Cover Readaloud	This Period is more engaged. A few took over	Giving Indiv Assist Calling Indv	
	21	24		24	21	Good Group willing to Learn	

B. Laboratory Examples

 Directions given to students for participation the Gravity lab from home. Students will explore

the effects on gravitational pull on objects in the solar system.

Pre-Work

Gather your supplies for the at home Lab Simulation for tomorrow

Supplies Needed

2 washers of equal size (or 2 rolls of tape)
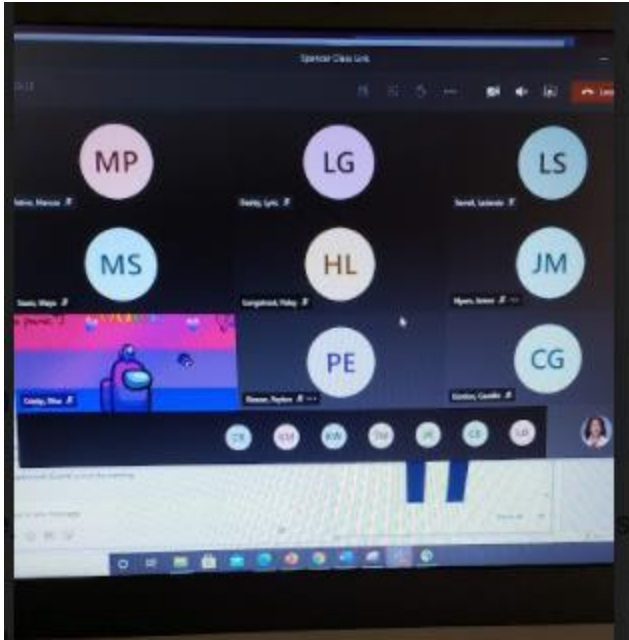Something small with a hole large enough to put a string through)

1 Sting 1 meter(3 feet long)

1 Piece of plastic pipe (or an empty toilet tisseue roll or a straw)

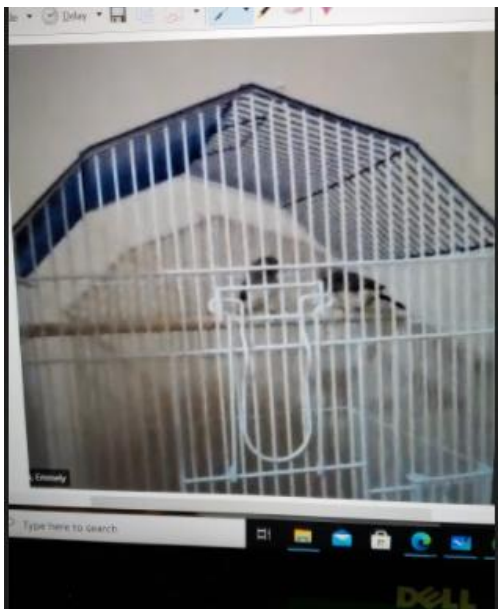   C. Photos

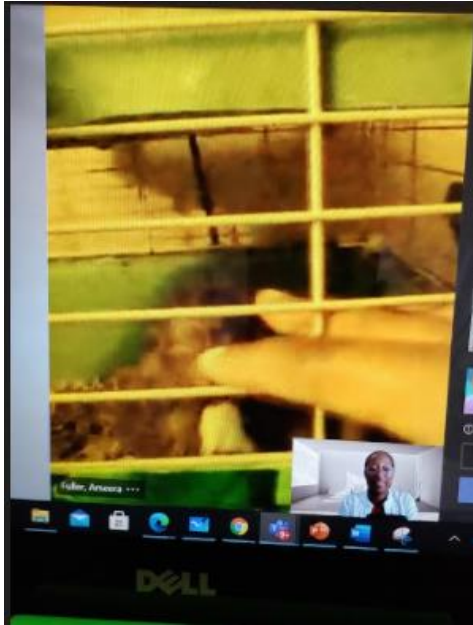Early photo – September (No Cameras on)

Photos – Week 9

D. Show and Tell – Teacher allow Students share to build relationships

 Family Medallions

 Pet Birds

Pet Hamster

E. Uncovering Student Ideas - Keeley probes used to engage students in conversation and assessment of prior knowledge.

Where Would It Fall?

Six friends were talking about asteroids and meteorites that could fall to the Earth. The friends wondered where an object from space would most likely fall. This is what they said:

Maya: "I think it has the greatest chance of landing in a desert."

Elsa: "I think it is most apt to land where humans are living."

Walter: "I think it will most likely land in an ocean."

Mac: "I think it will probably land on an ice-covered area."

Amber: "Chances are it will land on the largest continent."

Evan: "Most likely it will land in a body of freshwater."

Which person do you most agree with? Explain your reasons for where you think a large object from space would most likely fall.

Summer Talk

Six friends were talking. They each had different ideas about why it is warmer in the summer than in the winter. This is what they said:

Werner: "It's because the winter clouds block heat from the Sun."

Ava: "It's because the Sun gives off more heat in the summer than in winter."

Raul: "It's because Earth's tilt changes the angle of sunlight hitting Earth."

Fernando: "It's because the Earth orbits closer to the Sun in the summer than in the winter."

Shakira: "It's because one side of Earth faces the Sun and the other side faces away."

Susan: "It's because the Northern Hemisphere is closer to the Sun in summer than in the winter."

Which friend do you most agree with? _____

Describe your thinking about why it is warmer in the summer than in the winter. Provide an explanation for your answer.

_____

F. **Phase Two Data Charts**

The following data charts will be used in the next phase of action research to collect data to inform instruction. The focus will be on activities that engage students in the lesson.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Content Support/ Small Groups
Strategy or Tool Used:	PowerPoint	Nearpod	Keely Probe/ Uncovering Student Ideas	Saying Good Morning	Direct discussion
Participation With Prompting from Teacher					
Participation Without Prompting from Teacher					
Daily Notes by Teacher:					

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Content Support
Strategy or Tool Used for Engagement:	PowerPoint	Padlet Response	Laboratory	Connecting through use of Social cues	Small Groups
Period 1 Rating Scale 1-5 on Engagement					
Period 2 Rating Scale 1-5 on Engagement					
Period 3 Rating Scale 1-5 on Engagement					
Period 4 Rating Scale 1-5 on Engagement					
Period 5 Rating Scale 1-5 on Engagement					
Daily Notes by Teacher:					