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Improving Student Engagement Despite Lowering Attention Spans in the Classroom

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Abstract

Attention spans have been decreasing throughout society for many years, partially due to the constant increase of technological advances. The average human attention span of eight seconds is particularly concerning to teachers and others in the classroom. It does not seem that the average attention span is ever going to increase, so teachers must implement intentional methods and strategies within their classroom to keep their students' attention. Physical activities, technology, and hands-on lesson supports, small group instruction, shorter lesson times, flexible seating, and differentiated instruction are all strategies supported by research to improve student engagement within the classroom. Every classroom will respond differently, so teachers will benefit by incorporating the set of methods that work best for their students.

Introduction and Research Question

Attention span is the amount of time a mind spends focusing on a specific task before moving on to something else. The attention span crisis as a whole is developing out of a global addiction to technology (see Figure 2). Technology has infused its way into daily living and is almost inescapable in today's American society. Children's access to the internet at home has continued to increase the past few years (see Figure 3), and the heightened levels of technology intake has been shown to correlate with these attention problems and deficiencies. Social media platforms have shifted towards increased amounts of information in shorter periods of time, but what does this mean for teachers in the classroom?

Two Main Research Questions:

1. What methods and strategies can teachers implement into their classrooms to best keep their students' attention?
2. How should teachers alter their lessons to cater to the needs of today's students?

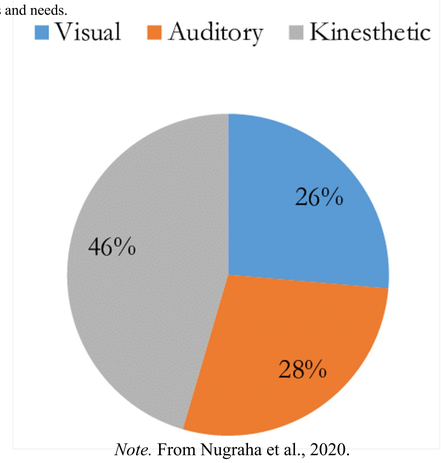
Methods

A literature review was conducted to investigate the research questions on this topic. Scholarly, peer-reviewed sources were analyzed and evaluated to determine the most effective engagement strategies for students and classrooms.

- **Search Terms Used:** attention spans, student engagement, strategies, methods, classroom, technology, differentiation, student achievement, teacher influence
- **Databases Used:**
  - EBSCO
  - ProQuest
  - Google Scholar
  - JSTOR
- **Inclusion Criteria:**
  - Peer-reviewed
  - Articles in English
  - Articles that focused on attention spans, engagement strategies, technology, and the classroom

Figure 1. Student learning styles.

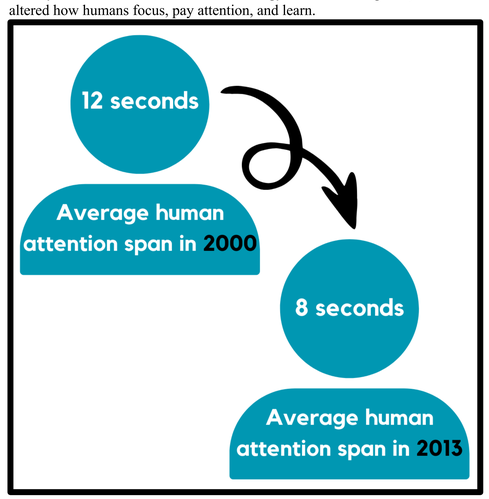
A VAK Learning Style Inventory was taken of this junior high class. 46% of them scored as prominently kinesthetic learners, 28% of them scored as auditory learners, and 26% of them scored as visual learners. This demonstrates the various learning styles that will be found in a classroom, and it shows the need for differentiation and instruction catered toward student learning styles and needs.



Note. From Nugraha et al., 2020.

Figure 2. Average attention spans.

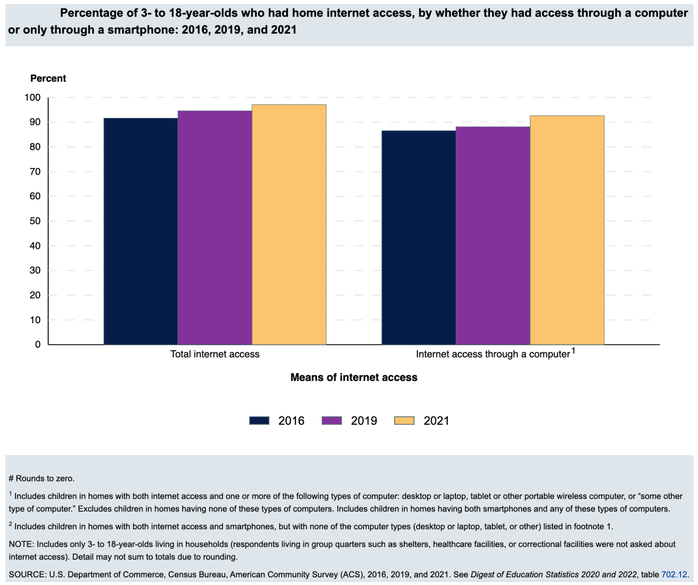
The average attention span has decreased over the past several years. This is directly correlated to the rise of technology and its intelligence, which has altered how humans focus, pay attention, and learn.



Note. Created by author and adapted from Georgiou, 2015.

Figure 3. Home internet access for children.

The internet access that children have at home has continued to increase as technology has grown and become more available to the general population. This affects attention spans because the more time children spend on electronics and the internet at home, the more they struggle with behavioral, social, and academic problems.



Note. From National Center for Education Statistics, 2023.

Figure 4. Flexible seating.

An example of what flexible seating may look like within an elementary school classroom. Different seating options are organized and separated into different pods, where students may be allowed to switch between periodically.

Note. From Tom Deris, 2019.

Results and Conclusion

Results

Strategies to Increase Student Engagement within the Classroom

- **Physical Activities:** Recess, physical education, and short movement videos allow students to meet their daily recommended level of physical activity, socialize, and break up large chunks of instructional time by focusing on a different task and environment.
- **Technology and Hands-On Supports:** Although technology is one of the reasons why attention spans are lowering, it can increase student engagement when implemented into a classroom properly. It provides students with independent work on their own devices while still allowing teachers to control what is being shared on each screen. Many technological tools also have a competitive aspect which encourages students to work hard and gain the highest score of the class.
- **Small Group Instruction:** Students are able to have more participation with the teacher in a smaller group, and the teacher can better personalize instruction and cater it to the specific needs of each student. Small groups allow students to educationally converse with their teacher and demonstrate active listening.
- **Shorter Lesson Times:** Student attention spans slowly increase during the first 10 minutes of a lesson and then fluctuate beyond that point. Teachers can split up long lessons into shorter sections and provide opportunities for students to have a "brain break," which helps refocus a distracted class.
- **Making Intentional Mistakes:** By deliberately making mistakes and then asking students questions, it allows students to participate more and gain confidence by explaining their thoughts, reasonings, and ideas to their teacher and classmates.
- **Seating Placement and Flexible Seating:** Students focus better depending on who is seated near them. Some students also learn better when they are more comfortable and seated in something other than a traditional desk, such as an exercise ball, bean bag, or stool (see Figure 4).
- **Differentiated Instruction:** Teachers can make the content more meaningful and personalized for students with different learning needs and styles including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners (see Figure 1).

Conclusion

Every class and every student will respond differently to each attention-enhancing strategy, so teachers should know their students well and try new things to best increase engagement and help their students. Educators are the key component in this fight for a child's engagement because they see students more than even their families do most days, and they are ultimately the ones who control the learning environment. Improving student engagement will result in students that are more academically successful, confident, knowledgeable, socially aware, respectable, and persevering. By developing students who have improved engagement, this will cause a ripple-effect throughout society that alters the attention span crisis for generations to come.

Future Work

1. Evaluating different technological devices in the classroom and whether they hinder or help student engagement and overall learning achievements.
2. Determining the amount of time technology should be utilized in the classroom.
3. Investigating if any of these engagement strategies have a differing impact depending on the number of students in a classroom.

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