

## **A Successful Partnership High School: Report by Dr. Lisa S. Johnson**

This is a summary of some information about a highly successful high school, and is strongly supportive of Riane Eisler's book *Tomorrow's Children*. The results of this study were reported in a dissertation written on a Partnership Education High School. The dissertation and this brief summary were written by Lisa S. Johnson, Ed.D. a researcher at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Dr. Johnson's work strongly supports Riane Eisler's position that autonomy and relevance matter to students.

The Partnership School is the Nova Project in Seattle, Washington, a public, urban high school which implements a student-led democracy and a large degree of student-centered instruction. Students attending this Partnership School were compared with students that attended another more traditional public school with similar demographics. The results indicate that the students of the Partnership school reported higher levels of engagement in school, greater frequency of participation in peer teaching and group work, higher levels of choice and control, and feelings of relevance to their interests and to their future. When compared to other urban schools, the students at the non-traditional, Partnership School also reported higher levels of feelings of belongingness.

The implications of this study are manifold. First, traditional schools were still spending a great deal of time in teacher-centered formats like lecture. Second, students from the non-traditional, Partnership school were more engaged and felt their time, even in lecture, was more relevant. Third, they reported having more control and choice during independent work. And finally, given that students at the Partnership school tended to have more positive and engaging school experiences, public educators would do well to consider what elements of the nontraditional school could be adapted to more traditional public schools. The following suggestions are given to public educators for consideration:

- credits and contracts rather than grades,
- student choice with regard to what classes are offered and when to attend class,
- consistent and close relationships between teachers and students,
- and student-led committees that allow for student voice regarding new teacher, staff and administration hires, school budget, school policy, and other items of student interest.

For more information on this study, please contact Lisa S. Johnson at [johnsonl@ucsc.edu](mailto:johnsonl@ucsc.edu).

### **Academic Engagement and the Experience of Flow: A Comparative Analysis of Non-Traditional and Traditional Secondary Schools**

Lisa S. Johnson, Ed.D.

This study examined students in a non-traditional public high school that implements student-centered instructional strategies that are a result of a school culture guided by an innovative educational framework called Partnership Education (Eisler, 2000). The Partnership Education framework promotes a democratically governed learning community which includes: a high degree of individual and social responsibility, one-on-one relationships between teachers and students, and evaluations based on contracts rather than grades. This investigation focused primarily on student time-use and engagement using the experience sampling method, questionnaires and interviews. A second sample of non-traditional public school students was used to compare time-use and levels of engagement. This comparison presented interesting and significant results that suggest that a higher proportion of student-centered activities may result in higher levels of student engagement.

Data were collected from a matched sample of 40 tenth grade and 40 twelfth grade students from two urban public schools. First, data were collected from 40 student volunteers (20 tenth grade, 20 twelfth grade) from the non-traditional school. Then a second, comparable data set was acquired from data previously collected in 1996-1997 as a part of the Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (SSYSD) at the University of Chicago (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). The data selected from the SSYSD were matched to the non-traditional school sample with respect to similarity of geographic location, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

## Instruments and Measures

Experience Sampling Method – an “in the moment” method in which participants are randomly signaled by alarm wristwatches throughout the course of a week. In response to the beep, students completed an experience sampling form (ESF) eight times a day for seven days. The ESM provided measures of:

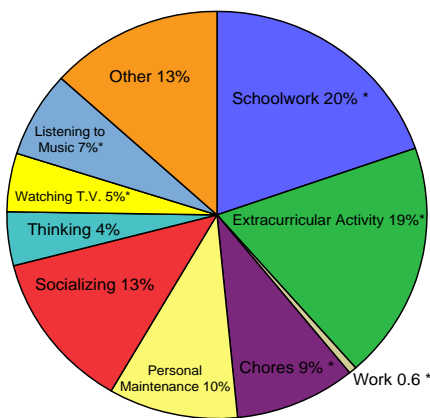
- Engagement: the mean of self-reported levels of interest, concentration and enjoyment ( $\alpha=.76$ ).
- Time-use: the proportion of responses in a given activity
- Relevance: the mean of self-reported levels of importance of the activity to themselves and their future goals ( $\alpha=.75$ ).
- Autonomy: the mean of self-reported levels of control and choice ( $\alpha=.58$ ).

A questionnaire provided demographic information including: grade, gender, ethnicity, and level of parent education.

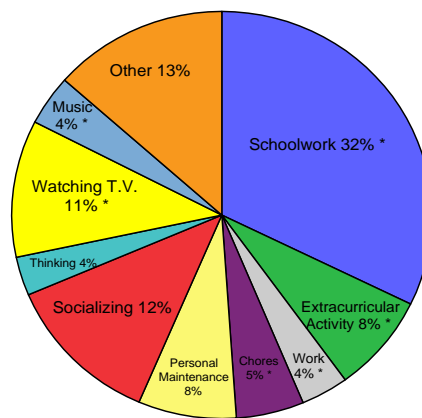
## Results

*How do students from non-traditional and traditional schools spend their time?* Students in the traditional sample report spending more time in school and more time doing homework than students in the non-traditional sample. Much of this time may be spent doing busywork that feels disengaging to adolescent students.

**Figure 1. Time Spent by Non-Traditional School Students**



**Figure 2. Time Spent by Traditional School Students**

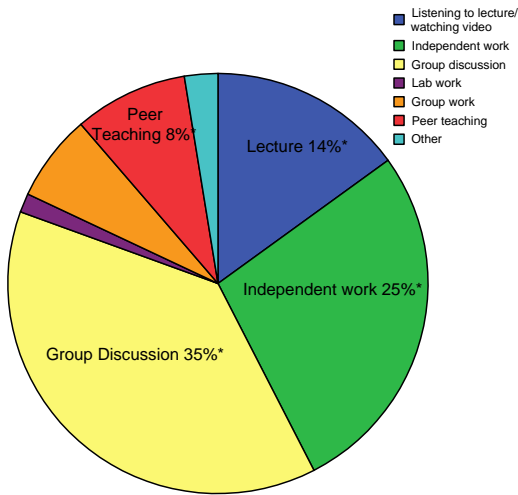


Note: \*  $p < .05$

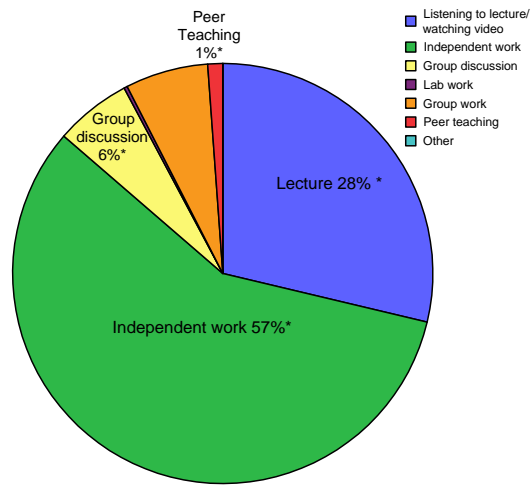
*How do students spend their time within the classrooms of non-traditional and traditional schools?*

Though students in the non-traditional sample report spending less time in school related activities, they report spending a significantly greater amount of time in their classrooms participating in student centered activities like group discussion. Students in the traditional school spend a significantly greater proportion of their time in school listening to lecture and doing individualized seatwork. Students from the non-traditional sample report spending nearly 34% of their classroom time involved in group discussion and other hands on activities, compared to 6% in the traditional sample used in this study.

**Figure 3. Non-Traditional Students' Experience of Classroom Time**



**Figure 4. Traditional School Students' Experience of Classroom Time**



Note: \*p<.05

*Do students from traditional and non-traditional schools differ in their subjective experience of everyday life?* T-tests of both school samples indicate no significant differences between means of engagement over the course of students' daily lives. However, significant differences were found in levels of autonomy and relevance with non-traditional students reporting higher levels in both variables.

**Table 1. General mean of subjective experiences by school**

	Non-Traditional School (n=40)	Traditional School (n=40)	t
Student engagement	5.98	5.84	1.08
Autonomy	6.49	6.17	2.50*
Relevance	4.97	4.55	2.92*

Note: \*p<.05

*Do students from traditional and non-traditional schools differ in their subjective experience in the classroom?* Through both independent sample T-tests and Hierarchical Linear Modeling, higher levels of engagement were found in the non-traditional sample both during independent work and in teacher-centered lecture. Thus, even time spent in less student-centered activities is reportedly more engaging to the non-traditional school students than the traditional school students. These findings suggest that the structure of the non-traditional school, which includes more time in student centered activities like group discussion, leads to higher levels of engagement even in activities that are teacher-centered, like lecture or watching videos.

Table 2. Average Levels of Engagement, Autonomy, Relevance and Flow During Three Instructional Methods.

	Non-traditional	Traditional	t
<b>Lecture</b>			
Engagement	6.67	5.41	2.48**
Autonomy	5.83	4.90	1.76
Relevance	6.19	4.72	2.71**
Flow	4.44	4.66	-0.53
<b>Group Work</b>			
Engagement	6.63	6.07	1.23
Autonomy	5.84	5.62	0.40
Relevance	5.82	4.96	1.57
Flow	5.15	5.34	-0.46
<b>Independent Work</b>			
Engagement	7.10	5.71	2.73**
Autonomy	6.43	5.26	2.20*
Relevance	5.91	6.44	-1.03
Flow	6.15	6.14	0.03

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001.

Further analyses were conducted with the entire data set using Hierarchical Linear Modeling which continues to suggest that the non-traditional school had a positive influence on student engagement. A test separating in-school responses from out-of-school responses was conducted. Along with these in-school and out-of-school data, the second level variable, school type was included. This analysis led to the results illustrated in Table 12.

Table 3. Fixed Effects of In-School vs. Out-of-School Responses, School Type and Student Engagement

Fixed Effect	Coefficient	SE	T-ratio
Engagement Intercept, $\gamma_{00}$	5.99	0.19	32.37***
Non-traditional School, $\gamma_{01}$	0.08	0.25	0.30
In School Responses slope, $\gamma_{10}$	-0.24	0.12	-2.07*
Non-traditional School, $\gamma_{11}$	0.59	0.19	3.15**

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001.

These results further illustrate the differences in levels of engagement between the two schools. First, the non-traditional school has little or no significant effect on engagement when the students that attend the school are at the movies, taking the bus, working, or grooming themselves. Yet when in school, the students at the non-traditional school had significantly higher levels of engagement than the traditional school students. Their engagement increased when they went to school (0.59, p<.01). The inverse is unfortunately true for the traditional school students. As they enter school their levels of engagement decrease (-0.24, p<.05).

## Conclusions

- Despite recent calls for student-centered instructional methods in traditional classrooms, traditional schools are still spending a great deal of time in teacher-centered formats.
- Students in the non-traditional school report spending a significantly greater amount of time in learner-centered activities than students in the traditional school sample.
- Looking across all activities, students from the non-traditional school are no more or less engaged than their traditional school peers. However, in school they are more engaged and feel more their time in lecture is more relevant and they have more control and choice during independent work.
- When in classroom activities, students in the non-traditional partnership school are more engaged compared to students in the traditional school which suggests that there is something unique about the nature of the non-traditional school. From the qualitative results, the differences between both schools are marked. The non-traditional partnership school runs as a student-led democracy. Students are given credit rather than grades.

## References

Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Schneider, B. (2000). Becoming adult: How teenagers prepare for the world of work, New York: Basic Books.

Eisler, R. (2000). Tomorrow's children: A blueprint for partnership education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Boulder: Westview Press.