The Engagement Partnership

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CORWIN

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Introduction

Human beings are inherently social, and learning is an inherently social process—whether it's sharing ideas with others as we search for a solution to a problem, searching out the expertise of another to help us understand something better, or watching as someone demonstrates a skill we are trying to master. Even when we are engaged in individual work, we remain connected to others. We recall a conversation that connects to what we are currently thinking and doing. We think about who we can call on to help us with something we are struggling to understand or master. What we learn and how we learn it are largely determined by the culture and community in which we learn. Our interactions with others have the potential to motivate us and fuel our engagement in learning—giving us a sudden insight we hadn't had before, sparking an interest in a new perspective or idea, or providing feedback that encourages us to keep going. They also have the potential to de-motivate us and send us on a pathway of disengaging—making us feel unsupported, discouraged, incompetent, distracted, or like we are being forced into something.

Trying to integrate social interaction and learning can be problematic for teachers. The prevailing culture in schools often treats social interaction as a threat to learning, opposing forces in a battle over the same resources of time, attention, interest, and effort. Schools continue to be places that privilege individual performance and remain stubbornly resistant to the power of partnerships. They tend to value a certain type of learning, one that sees teaching as a process of delivering knowledge and learning as a process of doing what the teacher wants. Listen and observe, take in the units of information, link them in the way the teacher wants them to be linked, and reproduce that knowledge when directed by the teacher to do so. This is the traditional culture of school. Engagement within this culture is largely about passive compliance. Teachers comply with the expectations to deliver *this content* to *these students* in *this amount of time* and get *this result*. Students comply with the expectations to passively receive *this content* during *this time* and demonstrate they have been successfully programmed in *this way* at *certain time points*.

At the same time, schools and teachers are bombarded with messages about the benefits of working with others. Countless

education policies have been crafted around the idea of 21st-century skills and the importance of developing learners who are skilled collaborators, lifelong learners, critical and creative thinkers, and equipped with the social skills necessary to interact and communicate with others. The idea that thinking with others is good for learning may be well supported, but so is the belief that having students work together is inherently risky, impractical, and ineffective for learning.

One of the many paradoxes of education today is that teachers are delivered policies and programs built around the ideals of cultivating collaborative, creative, and competent learners, while continuing to operate in systems that rely on competition, compliance, and control. As often happens, teachers are on the front lines of this cultural conflict and left to their own devices to survive the battle as best they can. Some of you may have already planted your flag on one side or the other, ready to defend your position. And so, the battle continues, with no resolution in sight. The tendency to think in binary terms remains an Achilles' heel to progress in education. We have a nasty habit of pitting ideas against each other instead of seeking to understand how they are connected and often complementary. Battles over explicit instruction versus inquiry learning, back to basics versus embracing innovation and change, the reading wars, the science of learning versus the art of teaching—this habit can cause us to get stuck in surface-level thinking and perpetuate misconceptions. It can also prevent us from realizing our potential as educators and our students' potential to become actively engaged, highly motivated, and skilled learners.

In relationships of unequal power—sometimes called one-up–one-down relationships—engagement is often characterized as something the one-down person needs to demonstrate and the one-up person needs to monitor and influence. For example, in a workplace, the employees are expected to be engaged in their work while the employer checks up on engagement through things like annual surveys or performance reviews. Organizations roll out initiatives designed to improve employee engagement—things like offering flexible working arrangements, creating more inviting office spaces, or organizing social events to bring people together. Schools often operate in a similar manner. Schools monitor student engagement through surveys looking at student attitudes toward school or data collected in relation to attendance and behavior referrals. Teachers use different strategies to get their students engaged and keep them engaged. And students are expected to demonstrate their engagement each day by turning up to school and doing what they are asked to do—clocking in and doing their job

like a dutiful employee. In the workplace, an employee who is not meeting the expectations for engagement might be put on a performance management plan, have their employment terminated, or opt to leave that job and find another one. The negative impact of employee disengagement on turnover and productivity has been well documented. Similarly, at school, a disengaged student might be put on a behavior management plan, be excluded for periods of time, or opt to self-exclude by staying away from school or dropping out. Again, the negative impact of disengagement on student achievement, academic success, and individual well-being is well known to those working in education. Work—whether it is the paid work of an employee or the unpaid work of a student—demands a certain level of effort, energy, time, and sacrifice. When this work is satisfying, rewarding, and meaningful, it can leave us feeling energized and motivated to stay engaged. However, if the work is seen as pointless, forced upon us, and unlikely to lead to any success, it can leave us feeling depleted, drained, and disengaged. Despite knowing how important engagement is and spending significant time, effort, and resources to improve engagement in the workplace and in schools, our efforts to date have been decidedly disappointing. A recent report on the *State of the Global Workplace* reported only 21% of employees are engaged and thriving at work, with 62% passively disengaged and 17% actively disengaged (Gallup, 2025). Teachers have one of the highest levels of burnout of any profession (Carstarphen, 2022), with one poll reporting only 27% planned on staying in the profession (Gradient Learning, 2023). Teachers continue to be concerned about student engagement, and their concern is warranted when we look at the evidence. When asked if they were engaged in what they were learning at school most of the time, half of the middle and high school students in a Project Tomorrow (2021) survey said they were not, and only 40% believed their school cared about them as a person. While students may not be interested in what they are learning at school, it would be wrong to assume they are not interested in learning. Many of the students we have spoken to are very interested in learning about new ideas, learning how to do new things, getting better at things they already know how to do, and building skills and knowledge that will help them in their lives now and in the future.

> *"I love learning new ideas and topics, and I enjoy the company of my friends and teachers. Growing as a person is important for me." —Tenth-Grade Student*

> *"I like to learn new things, especially if that information or those skills are something that I'm particularly interested in." —Sixth-Grade Student*

"I like writing the most because we can follow our own passions and I find out new ways to write."
—Third-Grade Student

This leads to a number of questions about our goals for engagement in our schools. Are we empowering our children and young people with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively drive their learning and growth across their lives? Or are we simply training them to be passively disengaged but compliant employees? Are we providing them with the necessary opportunities to experience what it is like to be highly engaged in the pursuit of learning and improvement? Or are we just getting them used to the reality of disengagement at work? Are we helping them to understand and proactively manage their engagement across a range of different circumstances and contexts? Or are we constraining them to a future of being dependent on others to manage and regulate their engagement for them?

In this book, we take a broad view of engagement in the hopes of developing more explicit connections between the skills needed to effectively regulate engagement and drive learning at school and the skills needed to effectively regulate engagement and drive improvement and growth in work and life. We should care about the engagement of our students, not just because we want our schools to function smoothly, but also because we want our students to achieve success at school. We want them to become empowered and skilled in the art of engagement—knowledgeable engagers who understand what motivates them to learn and what discourages them, and why; skilled drivers of engagement who recognize when they are disengaging or capable of more engagement, and have the strategies and tools to address it. Essential to becoming a master engager is developing a network of partnerships along the way—people who they enjoy learning from and those they enjoy learning with; people who look to them for support and those they look to when they need support; people who inspire, challenge, and motivate them to do more or go further; people who are there for them and ready to help them tackle the inevitable challenges of disengagement.

In the following chapters, we will explore the power of partnerships for engagement and learning. We will look at the evidence relating to learning with and from others, consider what it means to be partners in engagement, and explore how these partnerships can contribute to our engagement and growth throughout our lives. We will also address some of the

roadblocks we might encounter along the way and how we might tackle them. Being able to skilfully manage your engagement and energize your motivation to grow and improve is an important skill for life, not just for school. In this book, the focus is on *learner engagement*, acknowledging that schools are full of learners of all ages and that learning extends well beyond the classroom or school. But first, let's take a closer look at the concept of engagement. What does it mean to be engaged, and why are people so obsessed with it?

CHAPTER 1

What Is Engagement, and Why Do We Care About It?

Every now and then at school, I come across a subject that I really like, and when that happens, it creates a spark. And that drives me to go over expectations.

—Third-Grade Student

Have you ever experienced a moment in the classroom where you could feel the engagement bubbling away across the whole group? Teachers have often described this as a "buzz," the "vibe," or a "productive hum" as students engage with each other and learn together. I love asking teachers to describe these times because you can see the positive effect on them as they recall the event. Their eyes light up, their faces soften as they smile, and you can tell this was just as engaging for them as it was for their students. These are the magical moments that remind us why we got into teaching in the first place. Few, if any, teachers get into teaching because they want to spend their days nagging students to get to work and managing disruptions during a lesson. Most teachers I know want to help their students; they want to see their students succeed and grow, and they want their students to get excited about learning. Not only is engagement good for students; it is good for teachers as well. When our students are engaged in what

they are learning, it is motivating and energizing for us. It can inspire us to work even harder to support them and help them achieve their goals. In a social environment like a classroom, engagement is infectious. Many young people that I have spoken with describe the positive effect it has on them when they are around people who are obviously engaged in what they are doing and visibly excited by it.

It's very much a contribution of everyone. In one of our classes, we were looking at influences on the audience and in-game purchases, you know like micro transactions. And everyone was kind of giving their own personal experience with that. I gave my own with the game that I play, and I could see that it was influencing my teacher in a positive way. He was more excited to teach it because it was so current, and we all brought our own experiences to it, which made the class a bit more lively compared to other lessons. You could definitely feel the difference in energy in that lesson.

Engagement has become such a buzzword that few of us stop to question what it actually means. Chances are, you've probably used the term yourself without feeling the need to explain it. Not only do we assume that everyone knows what we mean, but we also assume that everyone has the same idea in their head when they think of engagement. The term has become increasingly familiar, applied to everything from the workplace to social media. Student engagement, employee engagement, customer engagement, community engagement, brand engagement, website engagement—the list is endless. It is not hard to get the message that engagement is desirable and has something to do with the interactions, connection, or involvement we have with something—for example, how committed and loyal we are to a particular brand, or how much we interact with other members of an online community. On the surface, engagement appears deceptively simple, but when we dig deeper, we begin to understand its complexity and why people care about it so much.

WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT ENGAGEMENT IN OUR SCHOOLS?

Researchers, policymakers, and educators have been on a quest to improve school engagement for decades, and the goal remains front of mind yet elusive for many. It is easy to understand why it is high on the agenda when we examine the evidence. The claim is that when students are more engaged, they perform better; conversely, when they are disengaged,

they tend to perform worse. The benefits of engagement also extend beyond academic success to include improvements in learning and well-being. Meanwhile, the risks of persistent disengagement can have serious and long-lasting effects on an individual's mental health and life trajectory beyond school. Some argue that we need to think about engagement and disengagement as two distinct concepts, rather than seeing them as varying degrees of the same thing (i.e., disengagement occurs when you have little to no engagement). They believe that this better reflects the different influence that each has on student outcomes. While engagement has long been associated with "academic flourishing," disengagement is a better predictor of "academic floundering" (Reeve & Jang, 2022, p. 96). I agree that it makes more sense to treat these as related yet separate concepts, especially from a teacher's perspective. The way we approach disengagement and engagement differs, and for that reason, they both deserve their own chapter in this book.

It is no surprise that schools continue to prioritize engagement in their improvement plans, and teachers continue to seek help with managing disengagement and improving engagement in their classrooms. Despite a mountain of research and a never-ending stream of advice on how teachers can improve student engagement, we appear further away than ever from achieving this goal.

Spotlight on the Research: The Challenge of Student Engagement

One pervasive and persistent problem is the pattern of declining student engagement we witness as students progress through the school system. Low rates of engagement among high school students is a widespread problem in urban, suburban, and rural schools—one that is stubbornly resistant to improvement initiatives and policies. A 2016 survey by Gallup found that only one-third of high school students reported being engaged, with engagement dropping from 74% in fifth grade to 34% in twelfth grade (Calderon & Yu, 2017).

In a study of 67 high schools in Philadelphia, Conner et al. (2022) surveyed nearly 20,000 students. Overall, the scores for engagement

(Continued)

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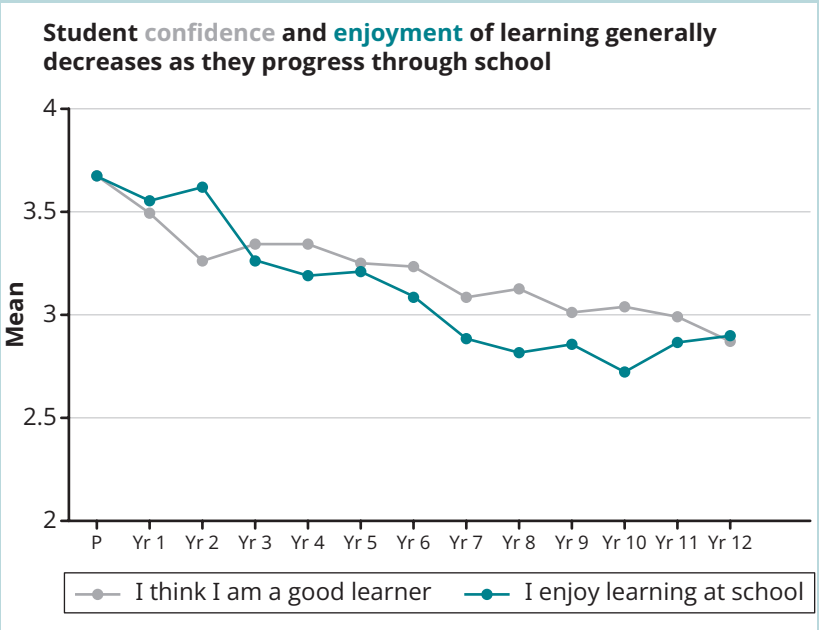
were low in relation to the students' level of interest in what they were learning, their enjoyment in being at school, and the perceived value of what they were learning at school. In order to investigate the engagement patterns across the schools, researchers looked at the frequency of response ratings at each school and then identified four different engagement profiles for the schools involved, based on the scores from their students: *disengaged, barely engaged, moderately engaged,* and *fully engaged*. Schools that were categorized as "disengaged" had the lowest engagement scores, while schools that were categorized as "fully engaged" had the highest scores. Worryingly, 43% of the schools fell into the *disengaged* category, while 28% were classified as *barely engaged*. Only 12% of the schools were described as *fully engaged*. Interestingly, all of the *fully engaged* schools were alternative schools serving students who had dropped out of or been expelled from traditional schools.

In 2023, my colleagues and I investigated the perspectives of 1,271 K–12 students and found the same familiar pattern (see Figure 1.1). As students progressed through the school system, their self-reported enjoyment of learning at school declined before a slight rise in the final two years of school (Grades 11 and 12). Their confidence in themselves as learners also declined over this time, but without the rise at the end.

FIGURE 1.1 ● Student Confidence and Enjoyment of Learning at School



The situation is not great for teachers either. Teachers continue to be concerned about student engagement in classroom learning experiences, with 80% of teachers in one survey reporting they are concerned about their students' engagement in classroom learning, and 95% believing it should be a priority for every school to support teachers with the tools and strategies they need to increase and sustain engagement (Gradient Learning, 2023).

It is clear that teachers and students need more support than what they are currently receiving. Equally clear is that it is time to rethink our approach to helping students actively engage in learning at school.

TIME TO REFLECT

Imagine if a friend came to you asking for advice about a job that they enjoyed less and less with each passing year, one that caused them to feel increasingly doubtful about their own abilities. What would you say to them? If we are honest, we would probably tell them to find a new job. Sadly, that is not an option for most students.

Now imagine being in your students' position. I know we have all been students at school, but times change and our memories fade. Consider the daily lives of various students and what it might be like to be in their shoes. What is a day like for students who find most things easy at school? What is a day like for those who rarely experience success in their learning? What about students facing significant challenges in their lives outside of school?

Take a moment to reflect on the challenges of student engagement and why we may continue to struggle to improve student experiences of learning at school. What does your experience tell you?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY *ENGAGEMENT*?

One of the core issues is a persistent lack of consensus and clarity about what we mean when we use the term *engagement*. I often begin my presentations and workshops by asking people to describe what they mean when they hear or use the term. For many, this is the first time they have been prompted to think

about this. While there are common words and phrases that people use—*effort*, *excitement*, *interest*, and so on—the range of diverse responses that emerge across the group shows just how different our thinking is when it comes to the concept of engagement, as well as how complex it is.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Consider what you mean when you use the word *engagement*. When you are discussing student engagement with your colleagues, what words do you usually use to describe it? What signs do you look for to know your students are engaged in what they are learning? Take a moment to make a quick mind map of all the words that come to mind when you think about the word *engagement*.

Set this aside for future reference as you continue reading.

Have a look at the word cloud that was generated when I asked an audience to share what *engagement* meant to them (Figure 1.2). The size of the word corresponds to the number of people who gave it as a response. You can see that *excitement* and *interest* were the most common words people submitted. How does it compare to the words you just recorded on your mind map?

FIGURE 1.2 ● What Does *Engagement* Mean to Teachers?

MOTIVATION IN ACTION

The concept of engagement is commonly associated with the field of human motivation.

In simple terms, motivation refers to the reason or reasons why we choose to do some things rather than other things—for example, working on an assignment versus talking with a friend. You might be motivated to read this book because you believe it could help you improve engagement in your school or classroom. I was motivated to write this book because I am passionate about engagement, and my experience tells me that people often struggle with the concept of engagement partnerships. Our motivation provides the fuel or energy for our engagement. Some like to think of engagement as motivation in action—the actions we take in pursuit of the goals we want to achieve. When our inner motivational fuel is running high, we feel energized and ready to take action. When that fuel tank is running low, it can be difficult to summon the energy and desire needed to keep going.

Many activities require ongoing motivation because it takes time to achieve the goals we have in mind. Learning is a good example of something that requires persistence and engagement over time. Just like a car, our inner motivational fuel tank can run low at times, impacting our capacity to remain engaged. We might start off with a flurry of activity, fueled by excitement and a sense of purpose. Once that initial excitement fades, we might hit a low and become disheartened, distracted, or disillusioned. These are the moments when we need our partners the most to help us refuel the tank and get going again. For instance, there is a reason why you decided to pick up this book and read it. It might be your interest in engagement; perhaps it connects with a challenge you are currently facing, or maybe you heard someone else talking about it and are curious to learn more. Whatever it is, it has provided enough fuel for you to engage in the action of starting to read. Continuing to read will require ongoing motivation, and actually putting the ideas into practice will take even more motivation.

Let's say that as you read, you start to make connections to things you have seen and done; this might add fuel to the fire and keep you engaged in what you are reading. You may find yourself discussing something you read with your colleague the next day at work, giving you more motivation to continue reading. At some point, you might get distracted by other things happening in your life and put the book aside until something motivates you to pick it up again. Perhaps you had a sudden insight during the day that prompted you to reflect on what you had read earlier and see it in a new way.

Thinking about engagement and motivation as an interconnected system of energy and action can help us identify actions

that will help us grow and improve, as well as the things we can do to sustain our motivation and persist with our goals over time. Engagement is not just a student thing; it is a human thing. The more we can make connections to our own experiences in life and learning, the better placed we will be to empathize with our students and support them to engage in learning at school. In this book, we will look specifically at the value of partnerships in supporting engagement and learning. This includes the partnership between a learner and a teacher, but also peer partnerships.

HOW DO RESEARCHERS DESCRIBE ENGAGEMENT?

To be sure, there are well-established frameworks for student engagement in the research literature. Engagement is commonly described as having multiple dimensions, and you may be familiar with the terms. These include *behavioral engagement* (e.g., being on task, attendance), *emotional engagement* (e.g., enjoyment, belonging), and *cognitive engagement* (e.g., applying learning strategies, valuing the learning). While this is the dominant framework used by researchers and policymakers, it does not mean everyone agrees on the different dimensions or how they should be applied. Some focus on one or two dimensions but not all, while others disagree on the indicators associated with each dimension.

Unfortunately, this lack of clarity is something that both educators and researchers continue to grapple with. Wong and Liem (2022) identified four issues that contribute to the ongoing "conceptual haziness" that plagues the field of engagement research. First, *student engagement* has become a broad umbrella term that encompasses everything from attendance and behavior in the classroom to self-regulation and a sense of belonging. By trying to be everything to everyone, the term is at risk of becoming meaningless. The second issue is a persistent lack of consistency in the terminology and definitions. Different researchers use different terms for the same thing, and they use the same term when they mean different things. The lack of a common language among researchers is seen as a significant roadblock to moving the field forward. Third, without an agreed-upon unifying theory of engagement, there is continued confusion about how it differs from other concepts like motivation and self-regulation. This further adds to the confusion in relation to engagement. Finally, there is often a lack of specification about what the object of engagement is. It is often unclear whether the focus is on engagement in school and school-related activities or

engagement in learning activities and experiences. Without this specificity, we could be talking about two very different things while assuming we are talking about the same thing. This ambiguity can also lead people to use tools that are unfit for the purpose, for example, using a one-off survey designed to evaluate engagement in school broadly to gather information about students' daily engagement in classroom learning activities.

While most seem to agree that engagement is important for students, greater precision and clarity in our language are needed at both the research and practice levels if we are to move forward with the concept of engagement. This lack of clarity is just one of the roadblocks we face when trying to tackle the challenge of engagement.

HOW DO TEACHERS DESCRIBE ENGAGEMENT?

When I first started researching student engagement, it quickly became clear to me that despite an enormous amount of research into the concept over the last several decades, we still know very little about how teachers and students perceive engagement within the context of daily classroom learning. It left me wondering whether our lack of progress in achieving the goal of better engagement in our schools might partly stem from a translation issue. How well do the frameworks and terminology used by researchers align with real-world experiences in a classroom? How useful are they for teachers struggling with the day-to-day challenge of trying to engage their students in learning? How useful are they for students struggling to get engaged and remain engaged in learning at school?

If I put my teacher hat on, I can understand the concepts of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. I can even picture different examples of each from my past experiences in the classroom. I can picture the excited faces of my kindergartners when we discovered that the rain gauge we had set up in the garden had filled up over the weekend after a big storm. I can recall the animated voices of a group of sixth graders as they put their heads together to figure out why they got a different answer than the group next to them. I remember the daily experience of scanning the room to check if everyone was on task and working diligently. What I struggle with is what to do with this information. How is being able to label the different aspects of engagement useful for me as a teacher? What do I do with that information? Do I need to plan for all three? Are they of equal importance, or is one more important than the others?

Is there a specific combination of the three that I should aim for? It leaves me with more questions than answers.

A CONTINUUM OF ENGAGEMENT

It was these swirling thoughts that motivated me to investigate further. Perhaps if we could better understand teachers' perspectives and experiences of engagement, we might be more equipped to support them in their engagement work. In 2016, I began my research by interviewing teachers and asking them to describe what engagement and disengagement looks like and sounds like in their classroom. I asked them about how they supported engagement and responded to disengagement, as well as the challenges they faced in relation to engaging their students. As the work progressed, I went into schools and observed teachers and students to see what this looked like in the classroom. I also surveyed students within those classrooms to gain some insight into their experiences and perspectives. If you have read *Reimagining Student Engagement* (Berry, 2022), you will be familiar with the continuum of engagement that came out of this initial work. The continuum represents the range of different ways in which teachers described engagement and disengagement based on their classroom experiences. It consists of three forms of disengagement (*disrupting*, *avoiding*, *withdrawing*) and three forms of engagement (*participating*, *investing*, *driving*), both of which range from passive to active. We will take a closer look at the continuum in the next chapter.

The intent was not to replace the existing frameworks for engagement used by researchers, but to offer an alternative lens for thinking about engagement in daily classroom learning experiences. The continuum has provided teachers and schools with a tool that connects with their real-life experiences in the classroom and offers greater clarity and depth to their thinking about learner engagement. Importantly, this model does not presume that a student can be labeled as *avoiding* or *participating*, but rather that they can be in one of those states at any given moment within a lesson. Engagement fluctuates during learning, and the continuum provides a tool to help teachers and students think about these shifts as they occur during a lesson. Helping the student and teacher to be aware of the current state of engagement is the first step before making decisions about what the next step is for building engagement. The continuum has also helped many build a shared language for engagement within their school, bringing the community together as they work toward a common vision of supporting their learners to become skilled and confident drivers of learning.

While the continuum has been useful for teachers, the question remained as to how well it represents the learner's perspective. In Chapter 2, we will look at the work that has been done to further develop the continuum by integrating both teacher and learner perspectives.

ENGAGEMENT IN CLASSROOM LEARNING EXPERIENCES

As teachers, we are generally interested in finding out if (and to what extent) our learners are engaged in the learning we planned for them *so that* we can decide if adjustments are needed to help them better engage with that learning. Our focus is on the ongoing formative evaluation of engagement in daily learning experiences—their *situational engagement*—which fluctuates and varies in response to the context. Your own experience will probably tell you that some lessons have higher levels of engagement than others, that some topics or activities are more engaging than others, and that some students seem to have greater fluctuations in their engagement than others. Navigating these fluctuations can be very challenging for teachers.

I have some students who are consistently there, present, engaged, ready to go all the time. Then there are those that fluctuate. They can have great weeks, they can have great hours, they can have a great 15 minutes. I'm always navigating that.

Students are also aware of how context influences their engagement. Ask students about their engagement in learning at school, and they often say it depends on many factors, including their mood, mindset, motivation, interest, and ability to focus; the topic, subject, and activity; and the classroom environment, teacher, and engagement of their peers.

Understanding the variable nature of engagement and the different sources of influence can help teachers navigate these tricky waters and feel more prepared to make decisions about how to better support their students' engagement in classroom learning experiences. In Chapters 8 and 9, we will look more closely at the motivators and de-motivators students encounter when learning at school.

Spotlight on the Research: Understanding Influences on Situational Engagement in Science

Rosenberg et al. (2023) examined the situational engagement of students in science to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of different sources of variability (individual, situational, and classroom) on student engagement. They used multiple methods and time points to investigate the *in-the-moment* self-reported engagement of 1,173 middle and high school science students across 50 different classrooms. The study found that a learner's engagement at any given moment is a factor of who they are, what is happening, and the nature of the learning environment. Furthermore, individual, situational, and classroom-level factors all contribute substantially to student engagement, but not in equal measure. The greatest share of variation in engagement came from the individual level (accounting for 30%–50%), while situational factors (what was happening at that moment) had the second-greatest influence, especially in relation to student enjoyment and interest in the learning. Although classroom context (e.g., classroom norms) explained the smallest share of variation in engagement, it still had an influence. The evidence suggests that the instructional choices teachers make from moment to moment have a measurable impact on their learners' engagement at that point in time. It also highlights the importance of understanding what individual learners bring to each learning experience and how this may shape their engagement.

When it comes to engagement, context matters. As teachers, we have a significant influence on that context through the instructional decisions we make, the relationships we form with students, and the classroom environment we create. However, we are not the only ones influencing engagement. Each individual learner brings with them a host of things that have the potential to either support their engagement in classroom learning experiences or serve as a roadblock to engagement. These include their prior knowledge, skills, and experiences; attitudes and beliefs about learning; interests and passions; and relationships within and outside of the classroom. Beyond this, the daily ups and downs of life can influence an individual's engagement. They might have missed the bus in the morning

and had a stressful start to the day. They might have had a fight with a friend at lunch. They might have had a bad night's sleep. Any of these things can have an impact on the individual's readiness to engage in learning in any given lesson. We will take a deeper look at the learner's role in the engagement partnership in Chapter 4. For now, let us take a closer look at the links between student agency, student voice, and student engagement in learning.

STUDENT AGENCY, VOICE, AND ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

There is growing interest in *agentic engagement* as an additional dimension of engagement, with some calling it the most important type of engagement for learning:

> *The twenty-first century is not only the age of information; it is the age of agency. Empowered with a sense of agency, students identify for themselves what matters, they explore and influence the world around them, and they become authors of their own learning, development, and life. Because of this, we suggest that engagement researchers need to expand and extend their existing conceptualization of engagement and disengagement as rooted not just in behavior, emotion, and cognition but also in agency.* (Reeve & Jang, 2022, p. 96)

Agentic engagement is described as the things students say and do during the process of learning to improve their own learning conditions. Acting with agency is the opposite of being passive and letting others make the decisions about what you will do and how you will do it. When students operate at the *driving* level of engagement, they act with agency as they strive to improve and achieve their learning goals. In passive mode, students resign themselves to whatever comes their way and accept learning conditions as they are without trying to influence them. They rely on others—primarily their teacher—to set learning goals, determine the activities and resources that will be used for learning, and evaluate whether they have achieved the learning goal or outcome. Importantly, many students need to be taught how to be agentic; we cannot assume they come equipped with knowledge and skills needed for this.

Many students have learned that the pathway to success in school is through passive compliance, but is this setting them up for success beyond school? During periods of online learning necessitated by the pandemic, many students struggled to

remain engaged in learning without their teacher managing and regulating their engagement for them—something they had come to expect from their experiences of learning at school. As one eleventh-grade student reflected:

> *It was hard to stay motivated and on top of things. Not really because I could get away with anything, but more the fact that there was just really me, like I was really on my own. Yeah, the teachers tried to help us, and they did pretty well. But when it came down to it, everything was just me in my room. There was no teacher keeping an eye on me, no one checking in on me, and no one to go to if I got stuck. It was easy to just check out and not do things.*

When students are *driving* and acting with agency, they do so with intention and purpose. They are focused on growing and improving and will interact in partnership with others to support their learning. They understand their needs, use their voice to advocate for themselves, and create the conditions that will help them to achieve their goals for learning.

STUDENT VOICE AS A PYRAMID OF INCREASING AGENCY

Increasingly, experts in the field of engagement are highlighting the importance of student voice about their learning as a pathway for addressing the alienation and disengagement of young people in schools. This is not about students talking for the sake of talking. This is about students learning how to use their voice to help them drive their own learning. This includes learning how to engage in self-questioning, self-explaining, self-regulating, self-assessing, and ultimately self-directing their learning.

Dana Mitra (2018) describes student voice as a pyramid of increasing agency. At the lowest level is *listening*, where adults seek the input and perspectives of young people and then interpret that information to make decisions. While this is a good step forward, adults can often misinterpret what young people are saying, and listening is not the same as including young people in the actual decision-making process. The next level of the pyramid is *collaborating*, where adults and young people work together, but with the adults generally taking the lead and having the ultimate say in decisions. At the highest level, young people take on a *leadership* role and make most of the decisions, while adults offer assistance. Mitra acknowledges that examples of this leadership level are generally found not within school settings but rather in community-based organizations.

This may be true, but there are still opportunities for students to take the lead in their learning at school when teachers help them build their skills as *drivers* and intentionally design learning experiences with *driving* in mind. When students operate in *driving* mode, they develop the skills and confidence to become leaders of their own learning, both at school and beyond.

STUDENT VOICE ABOUT LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

There is increasing evidence of the positive relationship between student voice about learning and engagement. A study in Chicago Public Schools asked students to rate how responsive their school was to student voice to investigate the relationship with engagement, finding that students had better grades and attendance in schools they rated as responsive to student voice compared to those in schools rated as less responsive (Kahne et al., 2022). Other studies have found that student voice significantly contributes to engagement, especially when students feel their teacher cares about them and supports them as a partner in learning (Conner et al., 2022; Zeldin et al., 2018):

> *The more often they feel that their teachers listen to what they have to say, the more often students believe their teachers care for them and respect them, and the more often they find their schoolwork interesting and enjoyable. (Conner et al., 2022, p. 767)*

When we are willing to recognize the value that young people can bring, we give them a chance to drive positive change for themselves and the communities they are part of. Young people can see things that adults might not see, and they may be more willing to raise issues that adults might avoid (Mitra, 2018). As one tenth-grade student explained to me when asked what advice she would give to schools that wanted to improve student engagement:

> *Just talk to your students because they're the ones learning, so they're going to have the advice you need to make things better at your school. They're the ones that have to be engaged, and you know, I think schools and teachers should get their students' opinions more because there's no point in just asking teachers—like, fair enough, they went to school and stuff, but it's changed since when they were at school. So, if they get the input of their students to know how to better their school and make it more engaging, I think that'll make a real difference.*

There are many examples from around the world where young people have been valuable partners in change and improvement efforts, including curriculum reform and implementation, education policy, staff development, school redesigns, and community art hubs. With that in mind, why wouldn't we want to partner with young people to improve their own learning? Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to work with them as they build their capacity as leaders in learning?

> *One of the best but frequently underutilized assets you have as a school or district leader is that your students have good ideas about how to improve your school and education in general. And they are willing to share those good ideas with you, if you are courageous enough to ask. This is especially true about how to create more equitable learning experiences for all students. (Project Tomorrow, 2021, p. 20)*

In summary, researchers, policymakers, and educators agree that supporting young people to be engaged in their learning at school is an important goal worth striving for. However, the evidence suggests that our collective efforts to date have been largely unsuccessful in helping us reach this goal. In this chapter, we examined some key roadblocks that may be getting in the way of progress, including a lack of clarity and consensus about what we mean by *engagement*, as well as underestimating our students' capacity to be valuable partners in our quest for better engagement. In the next chapter, we will focus on developing a better language for engagement, one of three foundational building blocks that will support us as we transform our approach to improving learner engagement in our schools.