LEARNing Landscapes

Student Engagement in the 21st Century

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Table of Contents

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Statement of Purpose

LEARNing Landscapes is an open access, peer-reviewed, online education journal supported by LEARN (Leading English Education and Resource Network). Published in the autumn and spring of each year, it attempts to make links between theory and practice and is built upon the principles of partnership, collaboration, inclusion, and attention to multiple perspectives and voices. The material in each publication attempts to share and showcase leading educational ideas, research and practices in Quebec, and beyond, by welcoming articles, interviews, visual representations, arts-informed work and multimedia texts to inspire teachers, administrators, and other educators to reflect upon and develop innovative possibilities within their own practices.

Review Board

Editorial

*I*t is an honour and a privilege to have been invited to become the Editor of the new, online, open access, and peer-reviewed journal entitled LEARNing Landscapes. I was pleased to accept this position because I believe the collaboration between the Leading English Education and Resource Network (LEARN)[1] and McGill in this project will provide an important link between the University and the educational community in Quebec, and beyond. Also, I believe the work will provide the opportunity to blur boundaries between theory and practice, and between discipline and research divides, and across educational sectors, areas that are striving for similar goals, but with little time to entertain exchanges or collaborative activities. The added appeal of the work is that the journal will be available to anyone and everyone without a subscription, and the technology will allow imaginative experimentation with different kinds of texts and graphic possibilities.

Less than a year ago, during a meeting with Michael Canuel, CEO of LEARN and his colleagues Rosa Kovalski and Mary Stewart, our discussion wandered off the immediate topic and we ended up in a wonderful "what if" moment. It was then that the kernel idea for LEARNing Landscapes was born. Within a month plans were solidified, a trajectory was set and the journey began. It has been an exhilarating one. I am totally indebted to Michael Canuel for his openness and support, to Mary Stewart, Managing Editor, for her friendship, conscientiousness and organizational skills, to Maryse Boutin, Graphic Designer, for her talent and patience, to David Mitchell, Copy Editor, for his careful and diligent work, and to Robert Costain, Systems Analyst at LEARN for his technology expertise and support.

My interest in student engagement spans more than three decades from the elementary to university classroom, but it became more focused and articulated in the mid-90s when I participated with five other colleagues from across Canada in the Student Engagement Project funded by the McConnell and Vancouver

Foundations that studied 10 schools across the country over a five-year period, and in my subsequent work with John Portelli, a colleague at the University of Toronto, and a member of the original project team.

The results of the study turned many of the long-held, stereotypical notions of student engagement upside down. It showed for example how engagement is located in a complex interface of contexts and people, rather than residing just within the student. These include the classroom, school, home and community, and the student, teachers, peers, and family. It suggested that engagement at times may be palpable, but at other times may be far less visible and, for this reason, must be examined carefully and deeply before conclusions are drawn. Most importantly, it demonstrated that the inequalities that exist for students in classrooms, schools, and society at large have huge implications for how students are judged and how engaged they are able or want to be. Educators need socially just and inclusive, rather than deficit notions of student engagement, and must include student voices in developing these concepts, in order to make inroads with all students, especially with those who are in most need of support.

There is no doubt that my interest in student engagement contributed to the decision to make this the theme of the inaugural issue of LEARNing Landscapes. However, it also seemed very appropriate to start an educational journal with a focus on students. The growing, global interest in the field of student engagement facilitated the gathering of a varied and very interesting set of articles to be featured in the issue. We have made an effort to include pieces that are predicated on the fundamental human proclivity for making sense of our world through narrative (Bruner, 1986; 1991) and that are accessible to a wide range of readers/viewers. These include varying forms of texts and modes of inquiry that portray the voices of students, teachers, principals and other educators, as well as mainstream and arts-based educational researchers.

The journal begins with two commentaries provided by the eminent journalist, education advocate, and first woman Chancellor, now Chancellor Emerita, of McGill University, Gretta Chambers, and by the renowned narrative research scholar, Professor Jean Clandinin, Director of the Centre for Research on Teacher Education at the University of Alberta. Chamber's piece casts a wide net for considering student engagement by juxtaposing the state of our educational institutions—and what that means for engaging students—with those of countries where food, shelter, health and safety are fundamental problems, and the prospects of schooling of any sort are remote for many children. Clandinin's commentary complements this nicely arguing

for a narrative curriculum to optimize student engagement, one that builds on and connects with identities and experiences of students in fundamental and inclusive ways.

The articles by Garmaise, Howell, Robertson, Sanders et al., Sturge Sparkes and Zyngier all focus on what students in varying contexts have to say about student engagement. Garmaise, who at the time of writing was a Quebec high school student, provides important suggestions about the "dos" and "don'ts" of student engagement. Howell, an Ontario high school student at the time of writing, reflects on how certain teachers sparked a passion for philosophy in him that contributed to his engagement in school and to independent study he pursued. Robertson, a former director general of a local school board, relates how he and colleagues studied the involvement of students from across the educational sectors in a series of strategic planning exercises that proved to be illuminating both in the ideas and suggestions that arose from the work, and in the insights gleaned about student voice and engagement. Sanders et al., in a study that took place in Philadelphia, show how youth leadership conferences held outside of school develop a sense of agency and belonging, as well as leadership competencies, and a tolerance for diversity that can be transferred to the school context to enhance student engagement. Sturge Sparkes draws on work from her doctoral research and subsequent experiences in Montreal school boards to show how student engagement can be realized through varying levels of participation and by listening to students talk about how to make learning meaningful. Finally and importantly, Zyngier, in a study conducted in Melbourne, Australia, shows how by putting youth at the centre of conversations about engagement, he was able to identify three contesting epistemological constructs of student engagement. He concludes that not all notions of student engagement are equal and this has consequences for how students are treated and how they participate in school.

Sullivan's compelling poems smoothly bridge the work on student voices and engagement with the subsequent articles that focus on a range of classroom stories of engagement. Her work demonstrates how form mediates understanding (Eisner, 1991; 2005) and why currently there is a keen interest in arts-based qualitative research. Grossi weaves together portions of her recently completed doctoral thesis to portray her autobiographical account of student engagement, and some pivotal moments she has experienced with students in South Africa over many years. Jarrett shares a small study she did in her secondary IV and V English classes in Montreal to obtain student opinions about student engagement. She juxtaposes these with a list of important features of student engagement she produced, and shares the insights

resulting from this work. Kingsley demonstrates how peer-tutoring conducted in an early childhood classroom in the Eastern Townships in Quebec, a study that was part of her doctoral thesis, enhances literacy learning, self-confidence and engagement among second language learners including those with learning challenges. Pasquin and Winn, two newly retired principals, argue that it is in the "being" of teaching and the "doing" of curriculum that promotes engagement, and they relate three persuasive narratives involving pre-service and graduate students to illustrate their points.

Three other researchers provide interesting perspectives on student engagement. Lessard et al., using a quantitative approach, studied 715 grade eight students in the Eastern Townships in Quebec to find out how "non-at-risk" students and "at-risk" students perceive school bonding differently and that peers and teachers play an important part in bonding. They suggest changing a focus that is predicated on a deficit notion of "at-risk" students to one of "at-promise" could influence the trajectory of students in school. Markus describes an approach to visual inquiry that uses collage to get at intuitive and tacit understandings of student engagement, ones that were not apparent to her before engaging in this process. Last, but certainly not least, Strong-Wilson and her research team of educators in a school board in the southern suburbs of Montreal examine how technology can be incorporated into pedagogical practices and conclude that teacher support and engagement contributes a great deal to student engagement and learning.

Hopefully, the kaleidoscope of perspectives, contexts, and voices presented here on the theme of student engagement will resonate with the work and experiences of other educators, and elicit new conversations that will contribute to further insights and nuances about ways to support and engage all students.

L.B.K.

Notes

1. LEARN is a non-profit, education foundation supported by the Québec-Canada Entente for Minority Language Education. Its mandate is to provide access to quality learning material and services, educational technology, and e-learning resources to the Québec English Education community.

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Commentary:
The Genesis of Student Engagement

Gretta Chambers, Chancellor Emerita, McGill University

ABSTRACT

The premise here is that learning is the focal point of the student condition and therefore, learners are the principal beneficiaries of any educational process. Considerable effort goes into making allowances for the fact that all students do not learn with the same ease or difficulty and that individual learning paths can be very different. My contention here is that the most important piece in the whole education conundrum is the attitude of learners towards the experience itself and that it is on that attitude in particular that their engagement in the process depends.

*A*s learning is the focal point of educational institutions, the learners are the principal beneficiaries of any educational process. Learning however is not like eating and therefore digesting, hearing and therefore recognizing sound, seeing and therefore absorbing a view. The results of eating, hearing and seeing are the naturally induced conditions of the use of the senses. The learning phenomenon is more often than not treated as though it were a matter of being presented with knowledge considered appropriate to the time and circumstances of the learner in question for the subject matter to be assimilated.

Great efforts are made, and rightly so, to allow for the fact that everyone does not learn in the same manner, that everyone does not necessarily grasp concepts with the same facility or difficulty. Myriad social and physical reasons mitigate uniformity in the learning experience. But no matter what the accommodations put in place to help level the learning field, no matter how good and inspiring the teachers

who make such a difference to the experience, if the potential learners are not engaged in the process, what they get out of it will fall short of what is expected of it. In my view, the most important piece in the whole education conundrum is the attitude of learners towards the experience itself. That attitude will colour their response to the subject matter to which they are being exposed.

Schools, colleges and universities are portrayed as venues for the advancement of learning from basic literacy to the most advanced training in the sciences, the humanities and the professions. Out of universities comes the research that now fuels economic development; out of all educational institutions comes the knowledge and know-how to contribute to personal and societal social and economic advancement. There is very little debate about any of that. Even those who do not see education as the driving force of their own financial security, recognize its importance in the larger scale of a society's economy. When I was young, the school of hard knocks had a quite respectable reputation particularly when discussing those who seemed to have thrived on its curricula. It is a very different story today when a young person looking for a "good" job must often pass the "diploma" test before being considered for employment in any capacity. So, if no one disputes the fact that more learning makes for better earning, how is it that we have not managed to persuade such a dangerously large proportion of our young people, particularly young men, that learning is good for them. We are not engaging them in the learning experience.

Children and young adults who come from families in which learning is highly prized, who have been brought up surrounded by books and other manifestations of knowledge come to the learning process as though to the manor born. Even the rebellious have an intrinsic understanding of learning as a way of acquiring information. They may become very selective about what they want to know but they have assimilated the connection between their part in the learning process and what they are likely to get out of it. Successful schools are those which keep their students engaged from Kindergarten to Secondary V. Successful schools are those which provide their students with the ingredients they need to make it feel safe and satisfying to engage in the process.

We talk a great deal about the role education and learning play in a person's earning power, and I have just joined in that chorus of opinion. It is a circumstance that is hard to gainsay in our day and age. What we talk and think much less about is the role of education and learning in a person's living experience. So many of the children in our schools do not have the good fortune of having a good life at home. They come to school because they have to find a haven in some way. Before those children

can become engaged in learning, they have to feel safe and sustained. We tend to feel that the just and generous culture of our society is reflected in our scholastic institutions, that we are providing nurturing for all students in our school system. But this does not appear to be universally accepted as a given by significant numbers of school children.

Across the world there are hundreds of millions of children who don't go to school at all. Famine, wars, genocides, abduction, slavery, mutilation, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other horrors perpetrated against poor and helpless people in many parts of the globe have left countless children without parents, shelter, arms and legs, and security of any kind. The misery found in many parts of Africa is hard to contemplate and seems impossible to alleviate in any definitive way. NGOs, international aid, the World Bank, the IMF, the WFO and the G8 have not yet come to the rescue of these destitute people in any sustained way. The UNICEF annual "State of the World's Children" report quoted former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's question, "Must we starve our children to pay our debts?" The answer continues it seems, to be "Yes." And, as all those who witness the situation on the ground continue to report, the world's financial and governmental establishments are still not honouring their commitments.

Information, about the area and its plight, however, is plentiful and quite startling. There have been several surveys undertaken by international organizations, like UNICEF, to ascertain what could be done specifically about the plight of children. Every one of these extensive enquiries came up with the same major finding. The one thing these children want more than anything—and many of them are in serious want—is a school to go to. They talked about some safe place where they could learn. Their hunger for learning, for a place to learn, was universal. These potential students are already engaged in their yearning for access to the learning experience which to them represents normality and the stability to regenerate the purpose of their lives. Something else that the sociology of struggling Africa shows is that the regions which have succeeded in finding some form of social and political stability and the beginnings of economic development are places which have managed to educate women who, in many areas, have become the driving forces of the school system. In struggling societies, the education of women is the greatest spur to social and economic progress. These are societies where education has not been widely available to women in the past. Today, it is being embraced by women to tremendous benefit, not only to the women themselves, but also to the communities to which they belong. The level of their engagement is as strong as it has become productive.

We see by these extreme examples, that engagement depends, not only on propitious settings, approaches and products but also on a hunger for self-protection, self-worth and self-improvement. That could be one of the reasons that the dropout rate among young women high school students is so much lower than it is among young men. Even in our privileged and equity-minded society, women are still much more vulnerable than men in countless ways and their instincts are geared to acquiring all the protective knowledge that learning can bring them.

Students at the postsecondary level tend to be already engaged if only tenuously. Those aiming at professional training have little choice but to engage in the learning process with specific targets in view. As they say, there is nothing that better concentrates the mind than the threat of imminent failure. These students have a reason that they themselves have chosen for going to university.

There are, however, even more college and university students who are there because that is where their schooling, their parents or an apparent lack of alternatives leads them to enroll. And engaging these unfocused young people can be a challenge. So many arrive at the postsecondary level with no goals in mind. Giving personally relevant and professionally useful meaning to the experience and the often boring course work are not necessarily part of the curricula. Education, apart from making them more employable in general, also gives them a better chance of making a success of their personal lives. A university education opens a door in the mind that will never close and that can afford ongoing learning possibilities.

One can lose money, friends, health, jobs, etcetera, but one can never lose what one has learned. Education is for life and its benefits—tangible and intangible—become an intrinsic part of a person's psyche and perspective. Pursuing the abstract nature of "education" for its own sake is an objective that is hard to instill in the young with little sense of direction. How many times have we all heard young women say, "Why would I need a college education if all I'm going to do is stay home and change diapers?" Little do they realize how valuable an education is to someone engaged in boring tasks, on the one hand, and, on the other, what a difference it can make to how one brings up one's children.

Engaging young minds in higher education is becoming an ongoing concern for postsecondary institutions. Academics and administrators have begun to hone in on some of the important extraneous reasons that keep students "hooked" on college and university learning. These reasons have been found to have many aspects in common with what makes wounded, displaced children long for school.

Disconnected high school, college and university students stick it out to graduation if they feel comfortable with the learning experience to which they are being subjected and if they can relate to at least some part of its content. Sometimes it takes only one course, more often than not, one teacher to break through the wall of irrelevance that so many of today's students face when it comes to the venues and contents of academic endeavor.

CEGEP and university administrations are putting more and more effort into addressing what students themselves feel they need to make the whole experience of college/university life satisfying, engaging and rewarding. All probing of students' attitudes towards the institution they attend suggests that insecurity due to a seemingly completely depersonalized existence can give newly minted students a feeling of being alone in a foreign setting. Often, by the time they can find their way through the academic and bureaucratic maze in which they find themselves, they have already jeopardized their term, if not their year. Better counseling, a more direct monitoring of progress right from the beginning and more visible support systems through academic and administrative hurdles also help to engage students in the "community" process on their way to finding their own intellectual engagement in the satisfaction of having learned. This inevitably follows a successfully executed effort at doing the work required.

Universities are faced with somewhat the same basic problems. Making students feel part of a community of scholarship rather than simply as individual numbers in a series of numbered courses is part of a fairly new nurturing concept. Better counseling, more streamlined and accessible administrative information and services and a more overtly student-centred approach to institutional bureaucracy are now part of an attempt at finding a more "engaging" approach to plugging students right from the outset into the potential benefits of joining the community of scholarship that surrounds them.

One of the experiments being undertaken at this level is the creation of elective undergraduate seminars modeled on postgraduate research based seminars. The idea here is to introduce undergraduates to a hands-on approach to the learning experience that students are not generally exposed to until much later in their academic careers. This is an experiment in engagement aimed at exposing undergraduate students to the intense pressure of digging up their own original information in the development of course and discussion content.

The most encouraging aspect of the "engagement" question is that it appears to now be accepted as a more and more important condition of the learning process. There is a widely recognized need to establish the engagement of students before the success in the learning experience can be considered readily achievable at all levels of the education continuum. Our society can so easily lose sight of the basic nature of an engagement that drives humanity's social structures and perspectives. The immediacy of our world and its imperatives overshadow the significance of how we got here. Civil society as we know it, and imperfect as it is, has come about through the acquisition of knowledge which has widened humanity's horizons and replaced violence as the main source of progress with quality of life enhancement. Contexts and goals change but the basic principle remains. Today, children and young adults who do not necessarily learn about the benefits of acquiring knowledge at home must find the ways and means of joining the quest for a better life for themselves on the way to joining the composite future.

Gretta Chambers graduated from McGill in 1947 with a B.A. in Political Science and History. Most of her professional career has been spent working in radio, television and print media as a political commentator. She has been very active in community work on commissions, boards and councils dealing with Social Services, Education, Cultural institutions, Legal and Judicial councils, Public Security questions, Health and Safely in the Workplace and Women's issues. She is a Companion of the Order of Canada and an Officer of the Order of Quebec. She has been a Governor of McGill University's Board of Governor since 1978 and served as Chancellor of the University from 1991 to 1999 when she was named Chancellor Emerita.

Commentary:
Narrative Conceptualizations of Student Engagement[1]

Jean Clandinin, University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

This commentary explores what it might mean to conceptualize student engagement narratively, that is, by conceptualizing it in terms of the curricula that children and teachers are living out in classrooms. It draws on recent school-based narrative inquiries and earlier theoretical work on curriculum making as negotiating a curriculum of lives. Thinking narratively about student engagement puts lives at the centre of curriculum making and calls forward questions about educators' purposes and intentions in schools.

In the classroom I watch as the teacher asks the children in this urban multi-cultural classroom to connect their lives to a book she is reading aloud to them. The book is part of an ongoing study of citizenship threaded around questions of student identity and belonging. The picture book (Say, 1999) is about a young woman of Japanese heritage who grows up in the United States and, as a teenager, is taken back to Japan by her parents. She struggles with the unfamiliar cultural, institutional and social landscapes in which she finds herself. As the teacher reads, I see the children looking at the pictures intently, caught up by the story. The children are quiet, focused. As she finishes reading, the teacher asks them to think about moments when they felt uncertain about who they were and what was happening for them. Many children raise their hands and, one by one, they begin to tell their stories. One child of Korean heritage, whose head has been down for some time, slowly raises his hand and begins to tell of being in an unfamiliar landscape

when he moved to a new school. The children called him "Little Chinese Boy." As he shares this story filled with tension in the living and perhaps in the telling, some children and the teacher nod in quiet unison, seemingly sharing a common understanding. Other children begin to tell other tension-filled stories. The children listen intently to each other, as each story telling seems to evoke other stories, stories of moments of uncertainty where they longed to belong. The teacher, finding her childhood stories resonating with those being told by the children, shares her own story of uncertainty as response.

My mind slips back several months to another moment when another teacher was in the same classroom and the students were also learning about the social, cultural and institutional landscapes of another country. The teacher was having the students take turns reading from a textbook filled with colorful illustrations of the country they were studying. In this moment, the teacher has called on a student whose family comes from this particular country. She was called to stand beside the teacher and to speak about the country, identifying language, religion and customs such as celebrations. The child, now positioned as expert in relation to her classmates, responded to the teacher's questions, sometimes with short answers, sometimes with puzzled looks and corrections to what the teacher said. I watched the other children shuffle in their desks, talk to others close by. I watched as one child built a structure out of his name card, pencils and pencil box. Other children watched him, as I did, and, wordlessly, others began to devise similar structures on their desks. The child sat down and the class returned to reading the textbook, each child taking a turn.

These story fragments call me to wonder about student engagement. At one level it is easy to say that in the first fragment the children are engaged in the task the teacher set before them; in the second they are not engaged in the teacher-set task. However, in the second fragment, there was the possibility of student engagement, both in the shared moment between the child positioned as expert and the teacher and as the children carefully watched each other and, in a wordless agreement, composed a shared story of building structures, an undertaking not unrelated to the ongoing science unit around building and conducting fair tests of strength. In each fragment, I wonder how the teacher would have thought about student engagement. For example, in the second, I wonder if the teacher noticed the shared engagement swirling around her and the child-expert beside her. Would she have named the students' shared engagement as engagement or would she have only named her work with the child as the focal point for engagement as their negotiation was more in line with the curricular outcomes of that particular mandated curriculum?

What do we mean by student engagement and can we think of it in narrative terms? A dictionary check offers words such as "the act of sharing in the activities of a group", "involvement", "participation", "commitment", and "intervention". These words are contrasted with "non-engagement, non-involvement, and nonparticipation—withdrawing from the activities of a group". These words do not easily help me see one of the situations above as engagement and the other as non-engagement for in both the children were engaged, in one instance, resonating in unique and varied ways with the teacher helping them think about questions of belonging and in the second with sharing a moment of constructing as the planned curriculum was enacted around them as a kind of main text to students' lived texts. If we think of student engagement as only what the teacher intended for engagement in that moment, we could more easily make a distinction. But is that a distinction that allows us to think about what children are experiencing? Does it move us to a more thoughtful understanding of student engagement that might help deepen both our understandings of what it means to speak of engagement and how it connects to curriculum making in classrooms? Can we somehow connect notions of student engagement with more narrative notions of experience as curriculum is made in classrooms?

Does reimagining student engagement in more narrative terms as curriculum is lived in classrooms help us move to new understandings of what is happening in classrooms? Does it help us understand what is important about student engagement, in terms of children's and teachers' experiences in curriculum making?

Understanding Curriculum Making as a Negotiated Narrative Composition

In our work we see each curriculum situation as the interaction of four curriculum commonplaces—learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). At one level this seems simple enough but, as we begin to work in classrooms in the moments of lived curriculum making, we see the ongoing negotiation of curriculum. As a consequence, we attend to each commonplace in relation to the others, in shifting relational ways. While we recognize there are different ways of thinking about curriculum, that is, as mandated, planned and lived curriculum, we, most often, attend to the lived curriculum, which is shaped by the planned and mandated curriculum. Attending to the curriculum being negotiated among lives in relation in schools, we think about a curriculum of lives (Aoki, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Portelli & Vibert, 2001).

Attending to the interaction of the curriculum commonplaces, we attend to each commonplace in narrative ways. To understand teachers, we need to understand each teacher's personal practical knowledge, his/her embodied, narrative, moral, emotional, and relational knowledge as it is expressed in practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). To understand children, we need to understand children's knowledge as nested knowledge, nested in the relational knowing between teachers and children (Lyons, 1990; Murphy, 2004). We need to attend to different kinds of stories—secret, sacred, and cover stories—as we attend to stories of teachers and teachers' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Like their teachers, children also hold and express their knowledge in secret and cover stories and we need to learn to attend to the secret and cover stories that children live in school. Children's stories and stories of children also shape the negotiation of a curriculum of lives.

We attend to the nested milieus, in-classroom places, out-of-classroom places, out-of-school places, storied places filled with stories of teachers, teacher stories, stories of school, school stories, stories of families, and families' stories. We (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) described the out-of-classroom places as shaped by what is funneled onto the landscape via a metaphoric conduit. This funneled-in prescriptive knowledge is part of these nested milieus. Narrative understandings of diverse subject matters are also part of a negotiation of a curriculum of lives. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998)

Understanding curriculum in narrative terms highlights that, within this complex fluid mix, lives are what become central. Lives, people's experiences, that is, who each of us are, and who we are becoming, are central. Attending narratively highlights the importance of staying wakeful to the experience children and families are living both in and out of schools, to the dreams children hold for their lives, to the dreams families hold for their children's lives, to the gaps, silences and exclusions shaped in the bumping places of children and families' experiences in schools (Clandinin et al, 2006). The negotiation of a curriculum of lives that continuously seeks to re-form, to re-make the silences, to hear and to learn from children's and teachers' stories about their experiences as they compose their lives in schools is complex, tension-filled, and challenging. When we also understand the ongoing negotiation of curriculum making as the ongoing negotiation of children's and teachers' stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), that is, as the ongoing negotiation of identities, the negotiation of who each are of us are and are becoming, there is a place to begin to reimagine student engagement narratively.

Reimagining Student Engagement Narratively

Understanding curriculum making as negotiating a curriculum of lives, including negotiating stories to live by, helps me wonder about thinking narratively about student engagement. Firstly, to understand student engagement we need to understand from within the context of ongoing stories to live by, a life in motion. Secondly, we need to come alongside each child in the midst of his/her storied life in order to understand the stories they are living and telling in that moment (Clandinin, 2007). Thirdly, we need to understand the narrative contexts shaped by stories of school, school stories, cultural stories, subject matter stories, teacher stories, stories of teachers and stories of the children who live in those landscapes. This complex interplay of stories—children's stories, stories of children, teachers' stories, stories of teachers, school stories, stories of school, families' stories, stories of families—are always moving, changing, shifting as one story calls forth an expression of someone's knowing that subsequently calls forth another's, and so on (Clandinin et al., 2006). From within this complex mix, perhaps we can begin to think about what student engagement would mean for each child, each teacher, in each moment.

In order to understand student engagement narratively, we need to understand the stories each child is living in a moment, trying to attend from within the three dimensional narrative inquiry space along temporal, social and place dimensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As well we need to understand something of the classroom stories, the family stories and the social and cultural narratives in which each child is embedded. We do this in relational ways so that we might be attentive to the possibility that the stories I might imagine are being lived out by each child are not the stories that he/she would tell of that moment. Understandings of student engagement would emerge from within the complex milieu of stories.

Returning to the storied fragments, we are called to wonder what is happening in each moment for each child. In the first moment the story of citizenship education that is being composed and lived out around the book reading, calls each child to respond, to tell his/her stories. Attention was present both at the time of reading as well as when each child spoke. As one child's story called forth another story, we realized they were placing themselves within each other person's story, that is, they were engaging in a kind of world traveling (Lugones, 1987). In this way the story telling and story responding, created resonant remembrances (Hoffman, 1994) that reverberated through their own experiences. At first, with his head down, one child appeared unengaged. Yet our view of him as unengaged was belied when he began

to tell his stories of resonant moments of tension. The teacher, reflecting back on this moment, noted that many other stories tumbled forth. What the book and each other's stories called forth from each child clearly mattered to them as they listened intently to each other. The teacher recalls sharing her story that she was once called "Japanese Girl." In the second storied fragment, however, there was also resonance as the teacher and the child engaged together in an interview of teacher questions raised by the textbook and mandated curriculum and the child's answers from her storied knowledge. There was also resonance as, by wordless, tacit understanding, structures were built as many students began to compose another curriculum.

In thinking about student engagement framed as a narrative concept, we are returned to considerations of the lives that are being composed and lived out in schools by teachers, children, parents, and others. Thinking narratively about student engagement puts lives at the centre of curriculum making and calls us to ask questions about our purposes, intentions and meaning making in these places called schools.

Notes

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Making the Connection

Amelia Garmaise, Dawson College

ABSTRACT

In "Making the Connection", I discuss, from a secondary high school student perspective, the do's and don'ts of how to engage students in the classroom. From the little details to the larger general concepts, this article outlines some ideas that could facilitate learning, and improve the classroom environment for both students and teachers.

Shading in the last bit of white space on his notes, T. glances around the classroom. Next to him, J. is staring absently at the wall. K. is talking to the girl next to her, not even bothering to keep her voice down. L. has her mathematics notes spread out on her lap, cramming for the test next period. Mr. E. drones on, oblivious or simply beyond caring.

It's the classic classroom scene, happening every day in schools everywhere. Therein lies the problem that every teacher faces: keeping students engaged. What does it take to hold the attention of the average student? Better yet, how do you draw in the apathetic student who would rather be anywhere else? What about the bored know-it-all?

In the classroom, an inherent boundary exists between the teacher and the students. Although the separation is necessary for effective teaching, certain connections need to be made for effective learning. If students feel they can talk to a teacher, they are more willing to listen to him/her. In-class discussion should be strongly encouraged. Although the old "sit down, shut up" method honestly does not work well, there is something to be said for directing the discussion. Students are more

engaged when they feel that they can contribute to the topic, but when everyone is talking at once, there is little movement forward. Even though raising one's hand is considered on "elementary school" practice, it actually does work well when consistently enforced. Also, bland definitions can only take a person so far. Practical application makes ideas and concepts easier to remember. The use of real-world examples, such as comparing and contrasting current systems with past ones in History, or Romeo and Juliet, with a popular TV/movie couple in English are neeeded. As well, teaching material should be as modern as possible. Although the basic principles may remain the same, the methods with which textbooks handle subject matter are constantly being adapted and improved.

If at all possible, students should be given some choice of what material to learn or what major projects to take on. People in general are more comfortable when they feel that they have a measure of control, and options, even small ones, allow students to enjoy what they are learning. The difficulty of assignments should increase progressively, and should help students build on their past successes. For certain subjects, lectures are appropriate, but there is no need to be dull. Teaching, in many ways, bears much resemblance to storytelling. It takes practice, but truly dynamic, charismatic teachers can transfer information more easily to students than those who are less so. Enthusiasm, entertaining anecdotes, and even odd personal quirks make the lessons stand out in students' minds. Specific subtopics, as well as the subject in general, should be related to daily life, or connections should be made to current events.

Finally, there are a few things that are best avoided in the classroom. Although teacher/student communication is important, no one likes to be constantly grilled for answers. It makes everyone tense and many students unhappy. Monotonous routine is frankly boring and may cause students to plan ahead of time to doze off during classes. School demands homework, but quickly assigning an overwhelming workload will have students admitting defeat just as fast. If they feel that they can't cope, a considerable number probably won't even try.

In the end, there is no single panacea for engaging all students. Some students are self-motivated enough to learn themselves. The odd few are inexorably determined to ignore all involvement with the subject. Most, however, fall between these extremes. They can be engaged, given the right motivation. If teachers are willing to work towards making a real connection, their students become willing to be involved.

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On Engagement

Nicholas Araki Howell, University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

In the following article, the author reflects on the experience of engagement at a high school level, through his discovery and application of philosophical concepts to a contemporary issue, and its importance to his development as a student and person.

Every interest needs a beginning, and luckily I found all I needed packaged for me between junior high and high school. My interest in philosophy was greatly helped along by teachers who took time to either prompt and provoke, or continue valuable conversations started in class. This came in all forms. My Grade 7 woodshop teacher, Mr. Beckett, talked about the foundations of scientific knowledge while I worked through technical drawings. In Grade 8, my English teacher, Mr. Taylor, kept me after class to talk about various philosophical revelations that have occurred in his life. Lastly, my Grade 11 epistemology teacher, Mr. Duncan, took time after class (even after I had finished his course) to debate and explain what he had taught me.

Although all three were very different people with very different messages, two essential factors may be drawn from their approaches which I believe made the difference to my education: discourse and personal attention. The first I believe was essential as it strengthened my ability to debate and see multiple sides to an issue, critical both to analytic and philosophical thinking. The second fostered my sense of purpose and gave me a better insight into what I was being taught, which made philosophy personally relevant to me. This good start, combined with having the

opportunity to write a major research paper as part of the International Baccalaureate program, and a social climate conducive to study of contemporary issues firmly secured this subject as my academic passion.

While searching for an area of philosophy to research, my teacher Mr. Duncan brought to my attention an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* discussing the problems of multiculturalism, linking it to postmodern philosophy. Bringing an article to show to me was not uncommon for Mr. Duncan, as this was one of his preferred ways of initiating a lesson, and this article was particularly interesting. It brought the dangers, as well as the impact, of philosophical ideas to my attention and made real to me the reasons for studying them, as areas of philosophy, postmodernism/poststructuralism are notoriously difficult to gain grounding in. Moreover, Derrida (who was to become the focus of my essay) has a fascinating, but extremely lengthy way of conveying his ideas. At first, I found the obstacles that came along with writing the paper to be intense, but, with time, I became better versed in the subject.

My first serious plunge into a university library provided me with many interesting books offering interpretations on the original works. These allowed me to gain a sense of the differing opinions on each man's works, and provided me with a guide to understanding their philosophical impact. Then, after these initial difficulties, the skills I gained in my studies started to become relevant in my other courses. Not only was it helpful to acquire a deep understanding of a major social system and the theories governing it, but the philosophical ideas I learned through my work also allowed me to evaluate works of literature more intelligently, assess political and historical events with greater insight, and gave me cause to redouble my efforts in French class, as a better knowledge of the language helped me understand, and read, Derrida's writings, and vice versa.

Although some interests, while intense at first, tend to fade over a period of time—this was not one of them. With every passing day I became more engrossed in my subject, and from it my interests branched out into other disciplines. After studying one day in the library, I came across a book that captivated me and made me appreciate the relationship between mathematics and philosophy much better. This led me to take courses in calculus and to teach myself about other topics of interest that I pursued in my spare time. This interest in mathematics allowed me to perform better, and in a complementary fashion, enjoy my science courses, making my work that much easier throughout my senior year. In time my initial passion to spread to other academic areas, causing me not only to value my education more, but also to appreciate the importance of each subject individually, as well as in relation to all

others. Once I was able to recognize the value of these works for studying multicul-
turalism, my interest became a part of my identity and my understanding of the
world.

So then, I have obviously touted the successes of this particular project in
my life, but what does that matter in a larger sense, to those who are interested in stu-
dent engagement? Perhaps some importance may be attributed to the need for the
different approaches that can enhance engagement, or that indeed students can/do
care about their education, and that it affects them profoundly when they become
captivated by an area of study. There are several other factors that I stress in order of
importance. Though one may take any number of measures in attempting to engage
another, there are a few prerequisites that aid the process. First, the work must be rel-
evant to each student's learning. Whether this is achieved through the application of
theory, or as simply as Mr. Duncan did by combing the morning paper for articles,
matters not—his approach gave credence to the students' efforts; what was deman-
ded was more than just a student product that was then converted to number grades
on a paper. Second, each student must have the competencies to be able to research
a topic of interest. When students realize that others have considered certain ideas is
both humbling and reassuring, but it also offers students the opportunity to make a
personal mark on the subject. Lastly, if there can be a last to this list, students cannot
just be "accepting" of ideas and information. By simply taking what one learns for
granted, the point is missed. Each student should be encouraged and able to contest
another's idea or viewpoint (respectfully of course), and hopefully with some success.
The independent thought and critical analysis involved are essential elements for
becoming fully engaged. One cannot simply absorb knowledge and be as truly pas-
sionate as one who engages, debates, and tests the theories before accepting them.
Furthermore, these kind of activities will more deeply entrench the ideas and conclu-
sions established in each student's mind rather than simply taking them at face value.

While perhaps my experience is not a new one, nor the methods and prac-
tices I am advocating novel, there is no doubt that they can produce success—not
only in the immediate and limited academic dimensions, but also in the greater goal
of forming a concept of self. Through engagement, in whatever subject or activity of
interest, one gains the purpose of self-determination and happiness in life, long after
all things waver or fade away entirely. Moreover, this engagement is possible for
everyone given the right set of circumstances.

Nicholas Araki Howell recently graduated from the International Baccalaureate program at Colonel By Secondary School in Ottawa, and is now studing at University of Toronto, Ontario. His research and future studies are concentrated in the philosophy of culture, postmodern and poststructural French theorists, and in organic chemistry, to provide a well-rounded appreciation for the world around him.

In Search of Our Students' Voices:
The Student Focus Day Story

J. Kenneth Robertson, New Frontiers School Board

ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on "student engagement" focuses on "motivating students to learn" (Voke, 2002), but what of our students' voices in the context of board-wide planning for their success? This is the story of the New Frontiers School Board's Student Focus Day, an initiative aimed at opening the planning process to the voices of our students by inspiring them to engage in open conversation, share in the leadership, and take responsibility for enacting the changes they envision.

*M*uch of the literature on "student engagement" and "student voice" focuses on "motivating students to learn" (Voke, 2002), and speaks to students' "psychological investment in learning" (Newman, 1992, p. 2). These writings are often linked to the notion of the classroom as a "professional learning community" as articulated in the work of Richard DuFour (1998, 2004), and centers on preparing teachers to give their students an active role in creating the learning and teaching context.

But what of our students' voice in the context of the school board-wide and school-wide strategic planning for "their" success that many North American jurisdictions now mandate? The "Student Focus Day Story" is one that shares how the New Frontiers School Board[1] (NFSB) attempted to bring its "students' voice" into the planning process.

Since July 1, 2003, the Province of Quebec in Canada has mandated the creation of *School Board Strategic Plans*, as well as school and adult center *Success Plans*. The purpose of these plans is to map out priorities for school boards, schools, and adult learning centres in terms of outcomes, strategies, and indicators of success. In a typically top-down approach, the Government of Quebec sets priorities based on data collected from student results on provincial exams and achievement tests and influence from public expectations of the education system. These are passed down to school boards, which in turn are expected to establish priorities for schools and centres.

Early in the initial planning process, the NFSB decided to take a different approach. Rather than focusing on the provincial priorities, the School Board decided to base its plan on its schools' and centres' priorities. Three themes emerged to form the foundation for the *School Board Strategic Plan for Success (SBSPS)*: enhancing student learning, ensuring students' social/emotional development, and creating an effective learning environment. Provincial priorities were then linked to those of the schools and centres in the context of the *SBSPS* to satisfy the government requirements. The hope was that this "grassroots approach" would focus the School Board resources to ensure that they serve our schools and centres.

In the second year of implementation of the *SBSPS*, as the Director General[2] of NFSB, I was reminded of the importance of our students' voice. Through professional conversation[3] with a colleague from McGill University who was researching "student engagement," I was asked if our students had been provided with an opportunity to influence the development of the School Board's plans. Without hesitation I indicated that the students' voice was channelled through the Governing Boards'[4] input into the development of the School Board's priorities. Upon reflection I realized that this was but a faint echo of the students' true voice.

The challenge was to provide an opportunity for students across the School Board to give voice to their feelings, concerns, and suggestions for improving the quality of learning experiences provided by our schools and centres. After discussing a number of possibilities with colleagues and student leaders, we decided that the School Board could give our students the opportunity to influence board-wide planning through a *Student Focus Day* (SFD), a day dedicated to listening to our students.

The School Board's four secondary Vice-Principals[5] provided the leadership for the day in recognition of their special connection with many of the secondary students who find the school experience challenging or prohibitive. As well, it was felt

that the Vice-Principals and the students from the elementary feeder schools would benefit from this early opportunity to engage in the dynamic exchange the day promised to provide.

Student teachers who were in their final practicum in several of the NFSB schools were invited to provide the leadership for the small group activities. This was an opportunity to emphasize the importance of student voice in the planning process for a group of future educational leaders.

Most importantly, in recognition of the leadership already provided by our students in our two large high schools, the *Student Leadership Team* from each school was asked to animate large group "icebreaker activities" throughout the day. The student leaders highlighted for the other students the importance of giving voice to their questions, concerns, hopes, and dreams. This was to become one of the common threads woven into future SFD experiences.

From the beginning, it was clear that it would be important to involve students with different "school" experiences. Students from each school or program offered by the School Board were asked to participate in the day: elementary, middle school[6], senior secondary, alternative programs, and adult education. Knowing that those selected to participate would greatly influence the tone of the students' voice, schools and centres were asked to select students to participate who demonstrated a balance between those who:

- perform well in the context of the school structure, and those who find living within the school structure challenging;
- enjoy their school experience, and those frustrated by their school experience; and
- provide formal leadership, and those who provide informal leadership.

For example, many of the School Board's secondary alternative students and adult students have opted for these programs because of their frustration with the standard secondary program offered in our high schools. Therefore, it was important to draw on their experiences to determine how they were affected and how things might be done differently in the future.

To ensure that the students understood that this was a special day and that something "different" was going to happen, it was decided that the event should be held at a community venue away from the daily activities of the schools and centres.

The buses arrived and the energy and enthusiasm with which the students were received by the leadership team immediately signaled that something special was about to happen.

I welcomed the students, emphasizing that this was a first-time event, and that nowhere else in Quebec had students been asked on a board-wide level to contribute to the planning process. I explained that we had brought them together to help us understand how students and educators could collaboratively make our schools and centres more responsive to their learning needs. Immediately the student leaders took over, raising the level of excitement with rousing cheers and series of lively activities that encouraged interaction amongst the students. Small groups combining students of similar levels but different schools and centres were then formed, and the sharing began.

The first main activity of the day was a "Think, Pair, Share" that provided each group with an opportunity to reflect on the three following sets of questions:

- What helps you learn? How do you learn? Think of the strategies and processes that help you learn best. These can include things you do or need in class, the type of teaching or learning styles that work best for you. What else helps you to be successful in school?

- What strategies do you use to be successful? What else can you do when you have difficulty in school?

- What can other people do to help you? Think of the role that these people can play: teachers, principals, school board, peers, professionals (psychologists, social workers, pastoral animators, etc).

Students shared through conversation and wrote their ideas on coloured Post-it® notes, each colour representing a set of questions that were grouped on different sections of the wall. The sheer volume of the visual representation of the students' thoughts, reflections, and ideas showed that the students had a tremendous amount to say. The first activity ended in a plenary session with representatives from each group sharing some of the key notions that had emerged from the paired and small group conversations. Everyone was amazed by how clearly and articulately the students expressed their wants, needs, and desires.

The energy the students had built up over the morning spilled into the lunch break, where the high school students spontaneously began to organize games and activities for the younger students.

After lunch the student leadership team did a quick activity to bring the group back together. Then in their small groups, the students were asked to review the feedback they had collected during the morning activity, and formulate specific recommendations based on the three themes in the School Board's strategic plan. The students set to work and within a relatively short period of time they formulated a large number of specific recommendations.

Fig. 1: Visual memory

Everyone felt strongly that it was important to create a "Visual Memory" of the day, and so a collective piece of art was created that memorialized the day. Each student was given a plain, white ceramic tile on which to express their feelings about the day. As the students completed their artwork, the tiles were assembled into a mosaic that is mounted at the School Board office as a reminder that it is essential to ensure that our Students' Voice is woven into every aspect of their education.

The day ended with one final student-led activity that culminated in laughter and hugs. Everyone left with a feeling that this first *Student Focus Day* would most certainly not be the last.

Fig. 2: Student feedback

It is important to note the following when considering the students' feedback. Although representative of our diverse student population, the sample was still relatively small and the positive synergy of the day may have influenced student responses. While we have tried to be true to the students' voices, it is important to note that the summary of the student feedback that follows below is how the organizers interpreted the large amount of qualitative data collected during the activities. Finally, while each summary of the student feedback has been aligned with a specific School Board priority, the respective summaries often bridge all three priorities.

Learning:

Students voiced, in a variety of ways, the following messages about their learning needs:

- Teachers are the most important influence on our students' learning experience. Students want teachers who are "*patient, interesting, fun, and caring*."

- Students want to be actively engaged in their learning; they want to be involved in the planning and animation of activities. They link motivation to being part of goal setting, even "*planning the day with the teacher*."

- Fifteen elementary students expressed the desire for activities that are "*hands-on and visual*"; "*seeing what we are learning*" is key to their success. Twenty-two others called for "*projects, group work, and discussion*." Middle school and high school students added to these by calling for "*energetic activities*" and "real-life experience learning." One student went as far as to state directly, "*Stop the lectures!*" Clearly, they intuitively embrace the constructivist approach[7].

Practical comments

- At the high school level, students expressed the need to review the semester system, the length of periods, and the use of double periods.

- Students at all levels called for more "*field trips*," emphasizing the importance of experiential learning.

- Throughout the activities, students repeatedly returned to the challenges of homework, suggesting the need for "*longer days*" to do the homework at school, study halls, and time in class where they could seek the assistance of their teachers and peers.

Emergent notions about social/emotional development:

- Students crave the synergy created by engaging others intellectually and socially. They need access to teachers, friends, peers, family, and others. (Interestingly, the students reached beyond the traditional contacts and supports and talked about the need to engage: aides, technicians, librarians, security guards, volunteers, custodians, nurses, counselors, vice-principals, principals, community members, and tutors, as summarized by one student, "*friendly people*.")

- Students have to learn to be their own advocates and actively seek help. Schools and centres have to assist our students by: showing them how to advocate effectively, by encouraging them to seek help, ensuring help is available when needed, developing specific strategies and mechanisms to provide help (e.g., Mediation Stations), and by ensuring that everyone supports the creation of a *helping culture*.

The practical comments related to this priority

- Students called for opportunities to "*get to know our peers better*," the opening of possibilities can be created by "*class discussions about us.*"

• Students feel the need for more direct contact with their teachers, more one-on-one. This was expressed in two different ways: calls for smaller class sizes, and the suggestion that there be "*two teachers in a classroom*." This speaks to the benefits of team-teaching or having resource teachers work directly with the classroom teachers.

Environmental themes

• There was a clear expression of the need for a *student-friendly learning environment*. Students want to be engaged in creating classrooms that, while being disciplined, orderly, clean, and quiet, allow for music, gum chewing, more colour, fresh air, and water. In essence, they are looking for classrooms, schools, and centres that they can call their own.

• Students want to be supported not only in the ways adults want to support them, but also in the ways they feel they need to be supported. For example, they want help in "*figuring out (their) weaknesses*," learning to "*focus on (their) work*," learning how to "*quiz (themselves)*," and even "*finding tricks, such as, guess and check*."

• While it might be tempting to place the use of technology under "learning," in fact the students made surprising little direct reference to the need for technology in their learning. Rather, the students often referred to the use of technology more as an integral and necessary part of their environment, an ever-present tool or support to which they should have ready access, as three students simply noted, "*use the Internet*."

Practical comment (articulated by many of the students)

• Create "*quiet space*" where students can study, read, and reflect.

Fig. 3: Encouraging our students

Summary of the Key Messages

We recognized the richness of the feedback we received from the students, and thought that it is helpful to summarize some of the key messages our students sent to the adults who control our school system:

- It is extremely important to accept and encourage our students' role in creating the conditions for their success.

- Students need to be given ownership and to be engaged.

- Teachers have a profound responsibility, for they have the greatest impact on our students' educational experience and ultimate success.

Moving Forward

It was not long before we recognized that this first day with our students was just a beginning. It is not enough to take student feedback and assume that their voices have been heard. Giving our students a voice is not only about "listening," but

also about empowering them. This notion led to a significant shift in the nature of the Student Focus Days to come.

Over the past two years we have held three subsequent *Students Focus Days*. SFD II was based on the realization that it was not enough to allow our students to "tell" us what they wanted, but that they had to "lead" the change in the context of their schools and centres. This meant that they had to translate their feedback into priorities and outcomes they could work towards with the support of the student body and adults within the schools.

Recognizing that there would be a number of significant challenges for students returning to their schools and centres to implement their plans, SFD III focused on providing them with enablers to carry out the work. These included the help of an adult and a small amount of financial support. The day was spent preparing to implement their plans with the support of these enablers.

At SFD IV, the students came ready to share the stories of their implementation, using aids that ranged from hand-drawn posters and collages to PowerPoint® presentations. Their use of language, ease in front of peers and adults, and ability to summarize the experience were astounding. However, the most powerful part of each presentation was the level of empathy, compassion, and benevolence that was a significant part of each and every plan. Our students showed their capacity to act both locally and globally, with results ranging from enabling extracurricular activities to "growing" their funds to support the development of wells in third world countries.

We had no idea when we began to "listen" to our students that first *Student Focus Day* that this experience would evolve into a part of the School Board culture. We have learned that sharing leadership with students involves risks that make some educational leaders uncomfortable. We know our students will challenge our accepted practices and bring to the conversations unique and innovative ideas that shake the foundations of these practices. However, our hope is that we will continue to have the courage to tap into the wealth of ideas and energy that our students bring to shared leadership.

Fig. 4: Shared leadership

Notes

1. The New Frontiers School Board offers quality educational services to approximately 5,000 English youth and adult students in the Southwest region of Quebec, Canada. Its territory stretches from the St. Lawrence River to the North, Autoroute 15 to the East, the American border to the South, and the Ontario border to the West. The School Board has a total of fourteen schools and centres in rural and suburban areas, including two adult and professional education centres, two secondary schools, and ten elementary schools.

2. "Director General" is the term used for the chief executive officer of a Quebec school board; elsewhere in North America this position is most commonly called "Superintendent" or "Director of Education."

3. Professional conversation refers to conversations between and amongst professionals that are as free as possible from competition for resources; conversations that open one's experiences and opinions and those of colleagues to questioning, testing, and play in the hope of generating new possibilities (Robertson, 2002, p. 49).

4.   A "Governing Board" is the school or centre governance body, as mandated with the *Quebec Education Act*, which guides school orientations through such things as the *Education Project*, policy, and input into *Success Plans*. Governing Boards include a majority of parents, students at the secondary and adult levels, staff representation, and community representation. The Principal or Centre Director acts as a resource to the Governing Board.

5.   Over the three-year period the Vice-Principals changed as some became Principals and new educational leaders joined the team, including: Suzan Fournier, Mike Helm, Daryl Ness, Lauren Small, Irene Agosto, Marc Brindle, and Jo-Anne Daviau.

6.   While the School Board does not have separate middle schools, each of the secondary schools has developed a "middle-school program."

7.   The *Quebec Education Plan* uses the *Constructivist Approach* as the cornerstone of curriculum change. This approach places students at the centre of their education, giving them control of their own learning. By using a project-based approach and carefully analyzing students' understanding, teachers are able to address their students' various learning styles and needs, while exploring the curriculum and various subject areas.

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Examining Ways in Which Youth Conferences Can Spell Out Gains in Community Youth Development and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

With student outcomes increasingly becoming associated with test scores, schools are less able to dedicate themselves to helping students learn how to become engaged and active participants in a democracy. As a result, other community-based organizations have stepped in to help students acquire the sense of agency, belonging, and competence—known as the "A, B, C's" of youth development—that research has shown to be crucial for youth to become contributing citizens. Drawing on survey, interview and observational data, this paper considers how two such organizations give students an opportunity for personal development, while providing youth with leadership skills and opportunities to engage in their schools and communities. This research suggests that in addition to the traditional "A, B, C's," it may be beneficial to consider aspects of diversity—proposed here as "D"—that play an important role in youth development, as well as the synergy of all four components of youth development that result in positive student outcomes.

*A*s the pressure to equate student outcomes with test scores increases, the broader democratic mission of schools to prepare students to be engaged and contributing citizens (Dewey, 1916; 1966) is fading into the background. Although public schools on the whole are successfully linking students to community service activities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001),

most fall short when it comes to providing students with opportunities to learn how to become citizens prepared to actively engage in their communities and participate in democracy (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000). Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that high school students frequently describe their school experiences as anonymous and powerless (Earls, 2003; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pope, 2001). To make matters worse, alienation results in two-thirds of students being disengaged from high schools (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). Disengaged students attend school less, have lower self-concepts, achieve less academically, and are more likely to drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Noguera, 2002).

Schools often do not provide sufficient opportunities to prepare youth for adulthood beyond core academic subjects. Community-based organizations frequently try to fill the gap by offering youth a broader range of learning opportunities, including participation in decision-making processes in government agencies, foundations, businesses, and even in schools. Research indicates that youth benefit greatly from engagement in decision-making, and that they can make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003; Mitra, 2004; National Research Council, 2002). Youth also can develop competencies that are critical for becoming involved and productive citizens. These competencies include tolerance, the ability to get along with others and to respectfully and effectively question authority, and public speaking. Participation also increases youth attachment to schools, which in turn correlates with improved academic outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Youth engagement in decision-making processes offers benefits to the organizations involved as well. A wide array of organizations, including government agencies, foundations, community-based groups, and businesses, have found that having youth participate in decision-making processes have helped them to become more connected and responsive to issues affecting youth (Zeldin, Kusgen-McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000). Youth-adult partnerships can spark great strides in an organization's vision and accomplishments (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). School-based youth-adult partnership initiatives have served as a catalyst for change in schools, by helping to improve teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships and by promoting changes in student assessment and teacher training (Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

While the benefits of youth engagement are documented in the literature (even though there is limited empirical research), many youth lack the skills and the

competencies to effectively participate in decision-making situations (Mitra, 2004). They tend to need explicit preparation to be able to interact effectively in adult-dominated environments (Mitra, in press). One avenue for providing this preparation is in youth conferences. This article examines the ways in which youth conferences have the ability to improve community youth development outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

Youth development is a process that prepares young people to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. Community youth development can help young people achieve their full potential by providing them with opportunities to develop "social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies" (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, 2005). To satisfy the many goals of community youth development, youth need to be involved more deeply than simply "being heard." They need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000) and to engage in active problem solving (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993). They also need to develop closer and more intimate connections with both adults and peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991).

A "community youth development" framework emphasizes the value and the importance of increasing youth voice and leadership in decision-making processes (McLaughlin, 1999). Building on lessons learned from the 1980s when the emphasis was on "prevention" of problems, youth development scholars now believe that a primary focus on avoiding dangers, such as drugs or sexual activity, diverts attention from understanding the competencies that adolescents do need to be prepared for the future (Cahill, 1997; Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1998, Pittman & Cahill, 1992, Pittman & Wright, 1991). A youth development perspective is needed so that researchers, policymakers and practitioners focus on the developmental needs of adolescents and the means by which institutions and organizations might address them (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003).

A youth development framework also offers a lens for conceptualizing the types of changes that one might see as youth participate in youth leadership activities. For instance, recent research has shown that youth need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Costello et al., 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000; Villarruel et al, 2003); to engage in active problem solving (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie,

1993; Takanishi, 1993); to develop closer and more intimate connection with adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Takanishi, 1993); and to assume more active classroom roles (Costello et al., 2000).

Our research draws upon three concepts for understanding youth experiences through student voice—agency, belonging, and competence. These three concepts are referred to informally by some youth development researchers and advocates as the "A, B, C's" of youth development (Carver, 1997). The choice to focus on agency, belonging and competence to reflect youth development outcomes derives from research in the fields of both psychology and youth development. Our research is based on the assets that youth need to succeed in school and in their lives overall. Drawing on previous research by Mitra (2003), Table One provides a summary of these three components of youth development, including a brief definition of each term and of the specific ways that youth embodied these assets as they engaged in their student voice activities.

Table 1.
Definitions of Youth Development Assets (Mitra, 2003)

Youth development asset	Conceptual definition
Agency	Acting or exerting influence and power in a given situation
Belonging	Developing meaningful relationships with other students and adults and having a role at the school
Competence	Developing new abilities and being appreciated for one's talents

Research in developmental psychology supports the finding that agency, belonging and competence are necessary factors for adolescents to remain motivated in school and to achieve academic success (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, et al., 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Stinson, 1993). The youth development field does not provide a consistent set of assets that youth need to be prepared for the future and to navigate their current situations. The most consistent set of factors include "confidence and compassion; connection and caring; competence and character" (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2000). Other lists include "autonomy,

belonging, and competence" (Schapps, Watson& Lewis, 1997), "self-worth, belonging and competence" (Kernaleguen, 1980), "knowledge, belonging and competence" (Villarruel and Lerner 1994), and "navigation, connection and productivity" (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 1998). We have chosen the Mitra typology because it is parsimonious. Our inquiry builds out of previous research conducted by Mitra (2003). And, after considering all of the possible choices discussed here, we found that Mitra's typology best fits the data in this study.

Methodology

This study examines the efforts of two youth leadership organizations, namely, *Go the Distance* and *Reach for Change*, which were working to build community youth development outcomes. The unit of analysis was each young person participating in the conference. Both organizations offered four-day leadership institutes free of charge to high school students and their adult mentors in the late spring of each year. Through lectures, interactive activities, small-group work, and discussions, the institutes strengthened individual and teamwork skills while fostering the creation of team projects related to school and/or community improvement. Student teams then worked to implement their projects back in their home communities. Five student groups from five schools were included in the Go the Distance sample. Each group of five students came from the same school. There were also five groups of 10 students included in the Reach for Change sample and these students attended different high schools across the central region of the state.

Over the course of the four-day conference, students from the *Go the Distance* conference were immersed in team-building activities with school-based teams. One or two faculty advisors and five students from each school participated. On the first day, students participated in icebreaker activities, so that they would become more acquainted with their mentors, their team members, and the other conference attendees. On the following two days, students attended personal development and team-building seminars. Some of these seminars focused on communication, personality exploration, and diversity. Other sessions provided students with time to develop a project that would be taken back to their school and implement over the course of the following year. During these sessions students also received counseling from local business leaders about resource strategy generation to support their project plans. On the last day, the students participated in a final teambuilding activity and presented their project proposals to the conference participants.

During the following year, the *Go the Distance* groups received intensive guidance from school faculty mentors as they implemented their projects. In addition, other conference staffers provided ongoing technical assistance through regular communication (2-4 times) with the teams to help them succeed in implementing their projects.

The structure of the *Reach for Change* group was somewhat different. Students who participated in the *Reach for Change* conference, upon arrival, were placed immediately into teams of ten students. A majority of these students did not know their team members, nor did they come from the same school. Furthermore, instead of having faculty mentors, students in the *Reach for Change* conference were mentored by "Near Peers" and "Near Peer Interns". Near Peers were college students. Some of them had participated as high school students in the *Reach for Change* conferences in the past. Near Peer Interns were high school students who had participated in the *Reach for Change* conference in the previous year. Both Near Peers and Near Peer Interns were responsible for fostering a positive group dynamic within the team and for facilitating the development of a "pseudo" group project. We use the term pseudo because although student teams were responsible for developing a plan for their projects, they were not required to implement the project once they returned to their respective schools. In *Reach for Change*, the training and support ended at the completion of the leadership institute.

Interview questions and observational protocols were designed to examine the intentions, structures, and outcomes of the conferences. Since each conference focused on teams of students working on a project, we shadowed, for the duration of each conference, six teams at the *Go the Distance* conference and five teams at the *Reach for Change* conference. Where possible, teams that reflected diversity were chosen. The choices were based on geography (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban), economic status (e.g., level of free or reduced lunch at the school), and past experience with the project (e.g., whether or not the school had previously attended the institute).

Members of our research team conducted the observations. During the meetings, researchers transcribed the conversations in as much verbatim as possible using their laptop computers. They also made note of unspoken emotions, gestures, and any undercurrents happening during the meetings. When direct transcription was not possible (such as instances in which the participants were engaged in team building activities involving movement), the researcher took notes and later transcribed these as soon as possible.

The research team was granted greater access to the *Go the Distance* groups than to the *Reach for Change* groups. Thus, in the *Go the Distance* teams, we were permitted to conduct focus group interviews with the youth and with their adult advisors. We also conducted follow-up interviews with the young people and adult advisors of our selected case studies during the following school year. Additionally, because of the ongoing technical assistance provided by *Go the Distance* staffers, we were able to record all telephone conversations that occurred between these staffers and the corresponding school teams during the following school year and to track progress and learn about the successes and struggles of the teams.

At the *Reach for Change* conference, the student groups were observed, but the research team was not permitted to conduct focus-group interviews with the students. Instead, two members of our research team served as participant observers during the conference. Both were appointed as Near Peers to one of the youth teams. The researchers were given digital recorders and, when they had the opportunity to do so, entered comments and reflections about the conference into the recorders throughout the day. They also provided longer briefings of their daily experiences in the evenings. Upon completion of the conference, they both wrote extended memos reflecting on the intention, processes, and outcomes of the conference. Also, They participated in an extended interview with the principal investigator of the project.

The analysis of the data began with the conceptual framework of community youth development conceived in previous research (Mitra, 2003). We expected that the new data would help us revise and improve the previous work (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Special care was taken to search for discrepant evidence and claims considered to be contradictory to the original framework. Using NVivo software, all of the interview and observational data were coded based on a coding tree designed to highlight our main research questions for the overall study: (1) What were the intentions of the youth leadership conferences? (2) What were the enacted activities and processes that occurred during the conferences? (3) What were the intended outcomes for youth? (4) What were the actual outcomes for youth? As a result, our coding tree included the following categories: intended and enacted youth outcomes, group process of the youth teams, intentions and actions of the youth teams, and intentions and actions of the non-profits, or organizations that hosted the conferences.

We decided to focus the research findings for this article on the intended and actualized outcomes of youth in both conferences. Next, we engaged in a process of axial coding that defined the relational nature of the outcomes of youth

by identifying their properties and dimensions. This helped to reduce the themes into key representational categories (Becker, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By moving back and forth between the categories and the original theoretical framework of the need for agency, belonging and competence for youth, we were able to create a typology of youth outcomes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

We examined the data to learn more about the intended outcomes that the two non-profit groups hoped the youth would achieve. Then we looked at the youth responses and experiences to identify the actual gains in community youth development outcomes. We found that overall, the intended outcomes aligned well with the actual experiences of young people at both conferences. The outcomes themselves fit with previous research of growth in agency, belonging and confidence (A, B, C), with one exception. In the *Go the Distance* groups, the youth also gained positive experiences in learning about and interacting in diverse environments, which we describe as the "D" in the ABCDs of youth development (See Table 2 for a description of the activities at the two conferences and whether or not the activity provided the youth with a positive outcome). We also found that, although youth outcomes were best described as the "ABCDs" of youth development, youth indicated that the experiences were most meaningful when these outcomes converged. Thus, a synergy of community youth development outcomes appears to have a deeper impact upon young people.

Table 2:

Conference Activities and the Impact of Developing Community Youth Outcomes

Conference	Go the Distance		Reach for Change	
	Activities	Impact	Activities	Impact
Agency	Icebreakers, team building activities, leadership seminar, development of a project, and working with adults.	Yes	Quest: a group activity that requires youth to complete as many challenges as possible in a certain amount of time.	Yes
Belonging	Working with a faculty mentor, building relationships with team members and other conference attendees, and icebreaker activities.	Yes	Quest, icebreaker activities, activities that encourage the creation of a shared experience, and the development of a group project.	Yes
Competence	Professional develop-ment seminars, such as communication and group-work seminars.	Yes	Increased leadership skills, teamwork skills and communication skills through the group project.	Yes
Diversity	The inclusion of people from different backgrounds and the participation in an in-depth discussion of diversity issues with trained college students.	Yes	The *Tolerance Troup*, a theatrical play that exposes the negative consequences of stereotypes.	Yes

Agency

Agency refers to the ability of students to "[act or exert] influence and power in a given situation" (Mitra, 2004, p. 655). By helping students recognize that they have control over their lives, students are empowered to make changes in their own lives and in their communities (Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney, & Villarruel, 2003). By putting their newfound capacity to work, students learn to construct situations in which they are able to work on their own behalf.

One of the primary goals of the *Go the Distance* conference was to provide students with a sense of agency. The *Go the Distance* staff provided students with personal development seminars and, through self-exploration, students developed agency. This aspect of self-exploration went beyond simply providing students with the basic principles of leadership. Patricia, the director of the *Go the Distance* conference, explained this process of self-exploration as a unique aspect of the conference and claimed that it set their conference apart from others:

> I think what makes ours different is two things. One is that we make kids accountable for doing something with the information that they get. We really do teach a lot during the four days about who you are as a person: What are your strengths and weaknesses? Who are you as a team member? Who are you as a team player on this team and on other teams if you think about it? How do you share your vision? How do you present your ideas to people and does the way you stand give a message? And if it does, you need to know what it is. And we sort out all their foundations and principles. But more than that, we really help kids to feel like they are empowered to make the difference.

The end result of both the self-exploration and team building seminars was to help students become aware of their personal characteristics, which proved to be an empowering experience. Once they understood themselves and how they work with others, they became more confident. This was evident in their ability to go back home and implement their proposed projects.

As mentioned above, agency is described as having the power to influence a situation or to assert one's opinion. Students who attended the *Go the Distance* conference repeatedly mentioned their increased self-confidence and ability to take on leadership roles as a result of the conference. For example, one student mentioned that as a result of *Go the Distance*, "…this program helped me recognize the leader that is inside of me, and I think it was there before, but I just didn't want to notice it and that always made me decide to be the follower, but this program help me expand my knowledge and increase my feelings as a leader." This student's comment was typical of the sentiments expressed by many of the students who attended the conference.

The students' newfound sense of agency was carried into their interactions with students the following school year after the *Go the Distance* conference. One young woman stated in a follow-up interview that she was: "Not afraid to talk to

somebody now. If we got new kids this year, it's easier to go up to somebody and you don't do the bending over and shaking their hands" (one of the icebreaker activities). It involved having students greet a conference attendee they did not know with a "silly handshake." A young man who attended the conference exemplified his new sense of agency when, in a follow-up interview about six months after the conference, he stated that:

> I think one of the things I learned was just to be more open. I was going to business math once and these kids were pushing each other in the halls and I just kind of separated them. But it didn't really work. I mean I tried. I attempted to, but they just pushed past. But I tried. Before I went to this conference, I wouldn't have done stuff like that.

Even though he was unsuccessful in breaking up the fight, when asked if he would attempt it again, he responded "yes." The *Go the Distance* leadership conference empowered its attendees. They were not only willing to take on more leadership roles in their schools, but they actually took on more risks in asserting themselves in front of the student body.

Similar to the *Go the Distance* conference, the founder of the *Reach for Change* conference stressed that helping students acquire a sense of agency was a crucial component of their experience. When asked how he knew that the program had been successful, the founder described a situation about an individual student (not a team) who went home and carried out the project she had helped to design, even though the *Reach for Change* conference did not require students to implement the project. He explained that the conference helped students to break down the mentality of the "command and control leadership" of the past. Students were encouraged not to wait until they were called upon to lead before becoming leaders. One of the conference coordinators explained:

> It really does have a powerful impact on the kids in terms of what they're able to do in a short period of time with strangers, which gives them a confidence that allows them to go back to their schools and try to do the same thing.

In conveying to students the idea that they have the power to change their communities, the conference helped students gain a sense of agency that encouraged them to become leaders in their communities.

Students' experiences throughout the conference reflected the type of agency the director envisioned. One student shared that he hoped all of the students in his group would take their projects back to their neighborhoods and implement them. Another reported that one of the most important things she learned from the conference was how to take more initiative in a group. Several students expressed that they felt that one of the benefits of the program was that it showed them that students are able to develop feasible projects that they can implement in their schools. Moreover, in consulting with members of the community to advance the projects, students realized the importance of alliances and working in cooperation with other groups in the community to achieve their goals, rather than working in isolation.

Belonging

Belonging refers to a sense of fitting into one's environment. It involves the creation and maintenance of a community in which meaningful relationships develop among students and between students and adults. Students "see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability, and begin to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole" (Carver, 1997, p. 146). In this situation, a sense of social responsibility develops for members of the group.

Another goal of the *Go the Distance* conference was to help students develop a sense of belonging among their school-based teams. The conference helped students achieve this goal, and the conference directors envisioned students returning to their schools to spread this sense of belonging among their classmates. Patricia, the director, described a project that helped students throughout an entire school to achieve that very goal:

> I think some schools do a really phenomenal job of that [bringing students together] and they've really bridged that gap in their school for some kids. Kennett High School outside of Philadelphia is doing the bilingual buddy system that they started four years ago, that now is a couple of hundred kids large. After school it went from one afternoon a month to three afternoons a week, just amazing work … So the kids are really building this bond and this connection.

The *Go the Distance* conference encouraged students to develop meaningful relationships through the team-building seminars. The icebreakers helped students

increase their comfort level with their team members and the students from other schools.

Over the four days of the conference, there were many activities and opportunities for youth to interact with students from other schools. Students overwhelmingly mentioned that they had made new friends throughout the conference. In the students' exit surveys, one of the most common comments about how they benefited from the conference was that they made connections with other peers. One student commented, "The thing I benefited the most was making a lot more friends!" and another student stated that, "I am usually shy, but coming here and meeting new people, I learned to step out of my 'comfort zone' and most the time I was here I hung out with new friends and was very open to new things." The abundance of comments about making new friends speaks volumes to the importance of having a sense of belonging.

Another important aspect of having a sense of belonging as a result of the *Go the Distance* leadership institute was the bonding of the school-based teams. The institute staff encouraged faculty mentors to select students to attend the conference from the various social groups that existed within their school. The hope was that, when students spent four days with other students from their schools who they did not know very well, it would help build a school-wide community. This appeared to happen when, for example, one student stated that, "I have learned more about myself, and my team and I have gotten closer to them" and another student commented that, "We have been able to come together and compromise. Our group had time to get to know each other better and know what everyone was going for."

As mentioned earlier, a central aspect of the leadership institute required students who attended the conference to implement their projects in their schools and to recruit other students to get involved. One student believed that her sense of belonging helped her group implement its project once the team returned to school: "My team has been able to become closer and work together more as a team. It also shows us how we can connect with others and how we can help other people connect."

Other students reported the conference made it easier for them to open up to people. One student reported that:

> And just being here and opening yourself up to people you don't know is a lot of fun surprisingly, and it's a privilege to do this, because I don't do that

when I am at home. When I made friends I kind of wanted to get to know them first, before I went and spilled my guts out to them. But now, I'm not afraid to do that because I realize it's kind of good to open up to people … they probably could have something in common. If you had a dark patch, you could talk about it and help each other. There are so many benefits to being an open person. And I'm just glad that I was able to come here and learn to be that way.

During the same focus group with "East Tree" High School, one student repeatedly commented that she only had one friend at her high school. At the time of the conference, she had recently regained her hearing, after being deaf for many years. Her disability was somewhat of a barrier in making friends and the *Go the Distance* conference helped her overcome that obstacle. When asked if she benefited from the conference, she responded: "Yeah, I got away from my one friend kind of. It made me want new friends…. I used to be really reserved, like real quiet. I'm not really like that any more. I'm more outgoing." During the same conversation, her other team members commented that they had noticed a change in her and they felt that she was also their friend.

In direct contrast to the specific focus on developing a sense of belonging that was a critical part of the *Go the Distance* conference, this was not one of the stated purposes of the *Reach for Change* conference. However, the bonds that formed were a crucial component of the success of the conference. The director explained that the youth shared more over the course of the four days at the conference than they had realized. One of the program coordinators related, "It's amazing. The last day, people were crying their eyes out because they're leaving these people. And I'll tell you some incredible friendships developed over such a short period of time."

Through the observations and talking with students, it became clear that the youth felt a strong sense of belonging at the *Reach for Change* conference. One student expressed amazement because he "didn't know so many people cared about the same things [he] did"; he felt that one of the most positive things about the conference was that:

A lot of us came from our same school, but we didn't stay in our own groups; we got paired up instead by our interests. I met so many people I would have never even talked to before if we were in the same school.

Students also formed close friendships with students from other schools. One student explained that at first she was hesitant about how people, who were so different, would be able to get along. Nevertheless, she quickly realized that she was able to relate to her group members better than she did with most of her friends and she felt like she had known her teammates her entire life.

Competence

Competence can consist of many different skills and talents. According to Carver (1997), developing competence means, "learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned" (p. 146). Students developed a variety of competences in both the *Go the Distance* and *Reach for Change* conferences. These skills included an increased ability in both communication and leadership.

In the case of *Go the Distance* leadership institute, students believed that their increased ability to communicate effectively was a significant outcome of the conference. Students were constantly engaged in activities that required them to communicate with their school group, as well as students from elsewhere. Students were also required to speak in front of the large group of 200 students as well as within smaller groups. Overall they really appreciated these activities and the opportunity to increase their communication skills. Some of the students' comments about communication included: "It has helped me become a better public speaker," "I have learned to communicate and be open;" and, "I know how to communicate and trust one another." Other comments centered on the increased ability to communicate with their group. One student stated: "By attending this institute I have learned how to break out of my comfort zone and also communicate with a team." Other students mentioned that: "I became a better communicator. I also learned new ways to get my ideas and opinions out without offending others; I have learned how to better communicate my ideas and thoughts without being afraid of rejection or sounding too bossy;" and, "I have personally benefited from this institute in many ways such as being able to communicate with others much easier and I also have found my strengths in a group."

Students who attended the *Reach for Change* conference also gained many skills they would need as future leaders in their communities. Through the conference, students reportedly became comfortable with the idea of sitting down with strangers, of learning about what they have in common, and of creating an interdependency that allowed them to tap into and harness the power of teamwork. Through various activities, students improved their ability to communicate in small

groups. They learned the importance of listening to and learning from others when trying to solve problems. In this way, they were learning to think outside of the box. According to the director, what students most commonly acknowledged was their increased self-confidence. With these skills in hand, students were prepared to become leaders when they returned home.

Students' comments reflected their realization that they were gaining the abilities they needed to be better leaders within their communities. While many students were already leaders at their schools, they learned how to become better group members, a skill that allowed them to work with others to meet their goals. With many strong personalities within a single group, students were forced to create a balance that allowed the team to achieve its goal. The conference provided an environment in which those who were typically quieter gained the confidence they needed to make their voices heard. Through the workshops they attended, students gained valuable information on the various steps that are necessary for project implementation.

Diversity

Both leadership conferences, decided to include, albeit to varying degrees, diversity as a component of their institutes. The two different approaches employed by the conferences revealed extremely varying student outcomes. In the case of the *Go the Distance* conference, diversity not only included race and ethnicity, but also the diversity that existed in racially homogenous schools. For example, diversity included the varying degrees of socioeconomic status represented among the student body and the breadth of activities in which the students participated, such as student government or soccer, and in contrast, those students who did not participate. The *Go the Distance* leadership conference incorporated diversity as a central component of their institute. When discussing the goals of the conference, Patricia stated that the goal was: "To identify a problem that they [students] see facing not just one group, but the school as a whole or the community as a whole, and then to find a way to bring together the student body to address it. And maybe not the whole student body, but to bring together representatives from every different kind of population that's put in that school to really address it." She went on to explain how the *Go the Distance* team made every attempt to encourage faculty advisors to pick diverse groups of students to attend the conference:

> We ask faculty to bring a group of five kids obviously that represent five different kinds of groups in your school. For some schools, like when Mountain

Valley comes, it's really hard for them to find five different kinds of kids even though they have their little groups but they're pretty homogeneous in terms of their population. Other schools say here's five kids and it's you know an athlete and a student council kid and a drama kid and a totally different franchise kid and this you know is a super, over-involved, out-of-school sort of dance, theater, singing kid. And by the way we have six more groups that are totally not represented and we'll get them involved when we get back. Other schools are like here it is. We all look the same, we all have known each other since we were 8 [years old], but we all do some different stuff at school. We all represent ourselves in a little bit different way.

Patricia's comment typifies the devotion of *Go the Distance* to including all types of students in the conference and eventually all types of students in the development of the school projects.

The *Go the Distance* conference took this commitment to diversity a step further. They provided explicit activities highlighting racial and ethnic diversity and they encouraged other aspects of diversity through the recruitment of students from the varying groups in their schools. The institute partnered with a local university that had developed a program called the *Race Project*. The project focused on racial/ethnic diversity issues. With the help of personnel from that project, the *Go the Distance* staff broke up the school teams into discussion groups of students from different schools. The *Race Project* provided a discussion leader for each group of about ten students, and they dialogued about the racial issues in their schools.

The students from the *Go the Distance* conference overwhelmingly appreciated both the discussion of racial diversity as well as the opportunity to meet students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. One student commented that:

Some people were like I've gotten to know a lot of people and I've become less stereotyping. I've also learned that even though you don't know a person you can still go up to them and talk about what you have in common. Because everybody is going to have something in common, no matter who you are. And even if you are different, they could have the same type of music in common or something. You can talk about it. And you can get to know each other and become friends and help each other out when you need help.

Other students mentioned that they were not aware of the inequalities that exist in other schools and communities. As a result, they were more grateful for the schools they attended: "I have learned to appreciate what my school does have. I have also learned a lot about other schools and how our school has no diversity." One student stated that: "Mostly, I learned a lot about how different my school is from others and with doing the 'diverse groups talk' I learned a lot about other cultures and people's opinions on different subjects." *Go the Distance* attendees overwhelmingly appreciated the experience and wanted to take it back to their schools. These two comments from students, exemplified their gratitude for the exposure to diverse people: "I myself have learned more about other cultures, and I want to show that to my school.… My eyes have been opened to a whole new world of diversity that I had yet to see. Not only did *Go the Distance* show me ways/skills/tips to becoming a better leader, but (it) also showed me other people, cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds."

In contrast to *Go the Distance*, diversity did not play a central role in the *Reach for Change* conference. Although the director expressed that the staff noticed that stereotypes were dismantled as students learned the power that diversity has, diversity itself was not really addressed. The only activity designed to highlight differences between students was called the *Tolerance Troupe*, a half-hour activity during which students observed performers interact. The performers took on personalities that exemplified varying forms of bigotry to expose to the audience the ignorance that is involved in buying into the stereotyping of people from religious and racial backgrounds. While students were encouraged to ask the performers questions about their portrayals of intolerant ways, the majority of the students were not engaged in the activity.

The lack of responses from students who attended the *Reach for Change* conference regarding their diversity session suggests that it did not have an impact on their personal development. Conversely, students who attended the *Go the Distance* conference were extremely influenced by their diversity session. Since the *Go the Distance* conference provided professionals, who were trained to discuss issues of race and ethnicity, and provided the students with a more intimate setting to discuss these sensitive subjects, the experience was more meaningful. Every student was given the opportunity to share his/her opinions and experiences about interacting and sharing in a diverse world. However, as mention above the *Reach for Change* conference presented a play for the 200 students who attended the conference and provided very little opportunity for all students to fully participate in the discussion that followed the theatrical performance. Both youth conferences

believed that the exposure to issues of diversity was an important element to include in their institutes. However, the varying approaches used to accomplish this goal resulted in two very different outcomes.

Synergy of Outcomes

Although the outcomes described in this paper are presented in four distinct categories (i.e., agency, belonging, competence, and diversity) many students' reports of the benefits of the conference encompassed all three aspects of youth development. Students did not talk about their outcomes in separate categories, and the evidence suggests that these aspects of youth development are not mutually exclusive. For example, one student commented that as a result of the conference: "I have learned that I need to realize when I need to stop leading/talking and listen to my group members. I have met new people and improved the bonds between my teammates. The icebreakers and fun activities were awesome, and our group is taking them back to our school to use as a part of our project." The student's comment includes aspects of agency, belonging, and competence. In this section of the paper, examples of how students described their growth as a result of the *Go the Distance* and *Reach for Change* conferences will be examined.

Students from the *Go the Distance* conference expressed that the sessions touched on all aspects of youth development described above. One student commented that: "I have become a little less shy and more willing to talk to strangers and people that I don't know. Also now I feel more comfortable talking about race and diversity. Also I learned how to be more of a leader than what I already am." Other similar comments included:

> I have benefited in many ways from this institute. I learned not only to be a good listener, but also responsible and know when to be a leader. I learned when to step up and when to step back. Through icebreaker activities, I learned how to be more open to new people, especially through the diversity seminar.

Another student reported that: "I have benefited from the institute a lot. I learned a lot about communication, diversity, and myself. The thing I benefited the most from was making a lot more friends!" Two other *Go the Distance* attendees commented that: "All kinds of benefits, such as communication, leadership skill, work with diverse group and especially making friendship with other backgrounds," and "My eyes have been opened to a whole new world of diversity that I had yet to see. Not only did *Go*

the Distance show me ways/skills/tips to becoming a better leader but also showed me other people, cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds." These statements from the *Go the Distance* students exemplify how they benefited from the conference and how these benefits encouraged other outcomes.

Similarly, students who attended *Reach for Change* demonstrated agency, belonging, and competence in a way that made each component inextricable from the others; this synergy of outcomes was most strongly demonstrated by Jerry, a tenth-grade student who attended the *Reach for Change* conference (see Figure 1). At the beginning of the conference, Jerry refused to participate in most activities, sitting sullenly in the corner with his headphones on his ears. He claimed that the only reason he attended *Reach for Change* was "to get out of the house." Nevertheless, by the end of the conference, the change in Jerry was obvious. He took the initiative to sign up for the talent show, something he said he would have never had the courage to do before. Such initiative demonstrated the sense of agency he had gained. Jerry chose to dedicate the song he performed to the friends he had made at the conference and, in particular, the members of his group, saying, "Thank you, guys. Without the support I felt from you, I would not have had the courage to even sign up for [the show]." He expressed to his mentor at the conference that this was the first time he had felt like he was not being judged and actually belonged. While he did not articulate the sense of competence he had gained, in observing him, it was clear that he had gained several new skills that allowed him to interact more effectively with others. One of the conference coordinators described the transformation, saying Jerry was:

> …a kid who had his headphones on, his head down, and he was really not wanting to be there, but then by Saturday he was participating and was dancing at the dance. You know, it seemed like he was really excited to be there.

The synergy of the three aspects of youth development in *Reach for Change* served to create positive outcomes for Jerry and the other conference participants.

Agency:
Jerry had the courage to sign up for the talent show.

Jerry's Positive Outcomes

Belonging:
Jerry expressed that he did not feel judged, for the first time.

Competence:
Jerry was able to communicate effectively with team members.
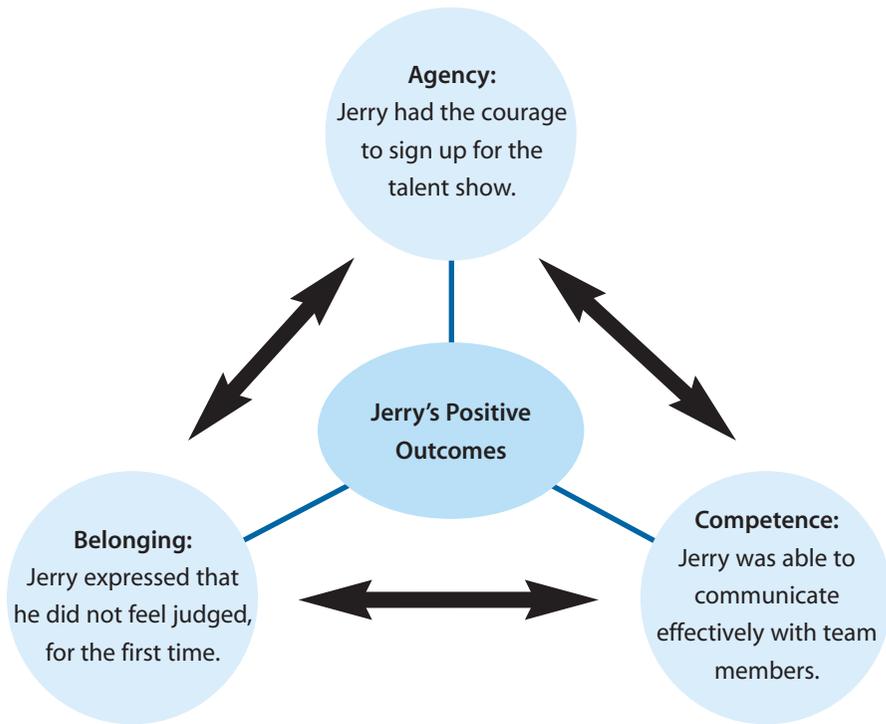
Fig. 1: Synergy of youth development outcomes

Discussion

As the national educational agenda continues to focus on accountability and as schools continue to focus on standardized tests, students need an outlet to develop positive emotional and personal characteristics. The findings from this research suggest that student leadership conferences can help fill this void for youth. By providing young people with time away from the rigidity of "schooling," students who attend leadership conferences are able to develop a sense of agency and belonging. Youth are also given the opportunity to develop a range of competencies, and to a varying degree, an understanding and appreciation for diversity.

The findings of this research suggest that some best practices for developing the ABCD's in youth occur through leadership conferences. For example, both the *Go the Distance* conference and the *Reach for Change* conference culminated with the creation of a *group project*. In the case of the *Go the Distance* conference, students

from the same school, who may not have known each other prior to the conference, were responsible for developing a project that would address a social problem in their school or in their community. Students who attended the *Reach for Change* conference may have come from the same school, but were grouped into teams of 10 with students who had similar interests in a social problem in their community. Many students were in groups with students who did not go to the same school. The group project or team aspect of these conferences allowed youth to connect with a small group of students on an intimate level. The project provided students with opportunities to voice their opinion and for students to alternately take the lead with the project, thereby helping young people to develop a sense of agency.

However, the *Go the Distance* conference took the group project component of the conference a step further. The conference required the youth to actually implement their projects once they returned to their schools. The project implementation provided them with increased opportunities for development. Many of the youth projects required more than a team of five to implement them, and often the projects were focused on building community within their school. Students from the *Go the Distance* conference had to recruit other students from their schools to assist in the further development and implementation of the project. It was assumed that all the students who attended the conference would take on a leadership role once they returned to their schools. In the past, some projects have stayed with youth for their entire school year. The group project experience allowed for further and long-lasting development of the ABCD's of youth because they had to use what they had learned and the new skills they had developed. Students were able to demonstrate the change and growth that they experienced through the conference. By taking on leadership roles in their schools and working with others, they continued to develop agency, belonging, competencies, and exposure to diversity. The group project component allowed for further synergy of the youth development outcomes through the continued responsibility they had for working with others and being a leader among their peers. Thus, this project exemplifies a youth development program grounded in a community youth development framework.

It was more difficult, however, for students who attended the *Reach for Change* conference to implement their projects because (1) there was no expectation to complete their projects and, (2) once they returned to their schools, their team members were scattered all over central Pennsylvania. This particular conference mirrors one-shot, youth programs that may include some important youth development aspects, but are not based on a community youth development framework.

Both *Go the Distance* and *Reach for Change* included a *mentorship component* in the structure of their conferences, albeit in very different ways. The *Go the Distance* conference requested that a faculty member from each school attend the conference and assist students in seeing through their projects. The faculty mentor component of the conference provided an extremely positive dimension for the youth participants. The experience of working with an adult helped them develop a stronger sense of agency. In the development of the group project, students were able to voice their opinions and even disagree with an authority figure. At the *Go the Distance* conference, as well, the hierarchical teacher-student relationship was flattened, so that students and faculty were on a more level playing field. Students felt empowered by working as equals with faculty as equals as opposed to being treated like children. The faculty mentorship also allowed youth and students to become better acquainted with each other. Once students returned to their schools, they felt an increased sense of belonging because they now had a faculty ally.

The *Reach for Change* conference developed an alternative *mentorship model*. Known as Near Peers and Near Peer Interns, the mentors at *Reach for Change* provided guidance for youth during the conference as described earlier in this paper. Near Peers and Interns participated in an intense training and teambuilding session before the youth arrived. They presented a united and emotionally connected front, while helping students develop a sense of self. The Near Peers and Interns provided youth with a concrete example of young people who have developed a sense of agency, belonging, and a variety of competencies. Many of the Near Peers and Interns had known each other for many years and their relationship exemplified the importance of belonging and sustaining meaningful friendships. Allowing *Reach for Change* attendees to continue their participation in the conference by becoming future Near Peers and Interns built a network of conference attendees that continued for years to come. It offered youth the opportunity to continue to develop the personal characteristics described in this study through early adulthood.

The findings also suggest that the inclusion of *diversity* in the ABC's of youth development is an appropriate addition. In the case of the leadership conferences described in this study, diversity is defined as groups of people from various racial/ethnic backgrounds, religions, income levels, and the many social groups that exist in schools, such as athletes, or students who are not involved in any extracurricular activities. Little research on youth programs to promote community youth development addresses the importance of diversity and cultural competence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Pittman, 1991). When diversity issues are discussed within the framework of youth leadership conferences, it is described as an avenue to help youth

develop a sense of belonging (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). However, the *Go the Distance* conference incorporated diversity issues on a much deeper level. Not only did this conference provide youth with an opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences with diverse groups of people, but also it purposely sought out diverse groups of students to take part. The diversity session at the conference suggested that when youth are given the opportunity to discuss issues of diversity in small groups, youth enjoy a meaningful experience. Students who attended the *Go the Distance* conference overwhelmingly indicated that they appreciated the discussions on diversity and the opportunity to meet different people who attended schools unlike their own. This experience expanded their frames of reference and their knowledge about the diversity that exists not even an hour away from their homes. It also broke down barriers. Students realized that they had more in common with people they once considered "different."

Future research on youth development and organizations considering developing youth conferences should focus on the four aspects of youth development: agency (A), belonging (B), competence (C), and diversity (D). Lastly, this study reveals that the four components of youth development do not occur in isolation from one another. For example, it appears that a sense of belonging can be influenced by the development of agency, the increased ability to communicate (competency), and the exposure to diversity. A plausible argument can be developed to explain how any one outcome influences the other. This finding suggests that youth conferences should make every attempt to encourage the development of all four components in order to maximize outcomes. Youth conference organizers should develop activities and personal development seminars that encourage the development of ABCD's in youth in concert with one another. Finally, and probably most difficult, given resource limitations, follow-up and "booster" sessions and/or technical assistance may be more likely to increase the sustainability of the outcomes.

Conclusion

Just as youth development scholars found that the emphasis on prevention does not adequately describe the skills youth need for the future (Cahill, 1997; Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1998, Perkins & Caldwell, 2005; Pittman & Cahill, 1992, Pittman & Wright, 1991), the research presented here suggests that the ABC's of youth development no longer suffice. In simply focusing on agency, belonging, and competency, institutions and organizations may fail to help students realize their full

potential. In conceptualizing the types of changes that one might see as youth participate in leadership activities, a better understanding of youth development is necessary.

As institutions and organizations work to meet the developmental needs of adolescents, it may be necessary to expand current views on student outcomes to include a "D" for diversity and cultural competence. For some students, the conferences are the first opportunity they have had to interact with others whose views do not necessarily align with their own. By exposing youth to students with different life experiences, the conferences prepare youth for the increasing diversity they will encounter when they go out into the world. Students need to be able to participate in discussions of diversity in a "safe" environment, an environment that encourages open-mindedness where youth will not be judged. When this opportunity is afforded youth, some of the challenges diversity may pose for them in the future can be overcome. Institutions and organizations can provide youth with skills that will help them to lead successful lives in a diverse society.

Groups that are interested in youth development would also benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of how the synergy of agency, belonging, competence, and diversity affects the outcomes for youth. Although these components of youth development are considered to develop in isolation, the true outcomes for students are the result of the synergistic intertwining of these dimensions. To meet the developmental needs of youth, institutions and organizations must determine how to include each of these four elements into their youth development conferences. While this is not to say that every activity must involve the ABCD's of youth development, this study suggests that those that do will have the greatest impact upon youth.

As schools increasingly succumb to the pressure to equate student outcomes with test scores, society will need to provide students with other opportunities to learn how to become citizens prepared to actively engage in their communities and to participate in democracy. The youth leadership conferences discussed in this paper described two such opportunities. In helping students to acquire the ABCD's of youth development, and by taking advantage of how these four components converge, *Going the Distance* and *Reach for Change* helped to re-engage students and gave them the self-esteem and power they were not receiving in schools. In this way, conferences can help students become engaged and contributing citizens.

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LINK TO:

http://cyfar.cas.psu.edu/PDFs/yesbookweb.pdf

http://resiliency.cas.psu.edu

http://www.ed.psu.edu/edthp/Faculty%20Bios/mitra.asp

Moving Into the Dance:
Exploring Facets of Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In this article the various dimensions of student engagement are examined. Based on understandings derived from her doctoral research, the author shows how engagement is realized through various levels of participation identified as assigned participation, shared participation and participative tone. She demonstrates that to enhance any theoretical explanation of engagement, one must include or "invite in" those being observed. The voices of students enrich the dialogue about how to define engagement. More importantly, the students articulate what needs to be done to make learning meaningful for them.

Prologue

o way, NO WAY are you going to catch me dancing," he declared in a clenched whisper audible to those around him, including me. Amid the embarrassed laughter around him, he grudgingly edged his way towards the stage. His body said it all. He skulked across the floor to a group of males already forming a reluctant row at the back. He slipped behind the group as if to make himself disappear.

Nathalie stood in front of them, eloquent and serene. Her stance spoke of a dancer well rehearsed and tuned for the task awaiting her. As she moved into the steps of the Baroque saraband, the students looked at her quizzically. Curiosity got the better of them. They were intrigued, as she, without apology, guided them through the choreography.

Denis sat at the front of the stage. His fingers glided over the fingerboard of his cello. Strains of Bach filled the auditorium. The music spoke of another time, yet was forever timeless. Nathalie took the cues from his playing. The students, in turn, took their cues from her. They followed, some with cumbersome half-hearted steps, as she led them. The student—who moments ago had declared his resistance to anyone who cared to listen—hesitated, took one step, then another. Caught in a sea of pirouettes and turns, he danced … he danced.

Introduction

In this paper I will explore the many facets of engagement: what it is and what it looks like, particularly through the eyes of students. Smithrim and Upistis (2005) refer to engagement as "being wholly involved." The word "engagement," they elaborate, is derived from the French word engagé, which, when used to describe a writer or artist means morally committed (p. 124). In my research, I conclude that engagement is participation that is "more than an action." It is "an emotional attachment and investment" (Sturge Sparkes, 2005, p. 276). Engagement implies, or suggests, an intensity of participation. Engagement is also, I surmise, context-bound. What may appear as engagement in one situation does not necessarily appear as engagement in another (p. 76). Vibert and Shields (2003) further expand on this notion by describing engagement as involvement in schooling that is a point well along "a continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic world view" (p. 237). Defining the word engagement is an interesting exercise, far more complicated than it initially appears. For purposes of this paper, I will not be focusing on engagement from a theoretical perspective, although as any researcher knows, theory is always there. Rather, I will examine engagement through the eyes of students. I will build my argument primarily upon findings generated from my doctoral research conducted a few years ago. I will also weave into my writing observations from more recent interactions with students as exemplified in the vignette described in the prologue.

Situating My Study

Study Site

The primary site for my initial inquiry into student engagement was a Grade VII classroom in a high school in the Montreal area. Approximately 1200 students populated the school ranging from grade VII to XI. To make the school welcoming for the younger students, the physical plant was organized as a "school within a school" (Sturge Sparkes & Smith, 1998, p. 140). The Grade VII and VIII classes were housed in a separate wing of the building with their own administrative office.

The classroom being examined was a component of the Alternative Learning Program (ALP) offered in the school for about ten years. The program was designed to provide an enriched learning environment for students in Grades VII-IX. It was created to compete with the curriculum being offered in private schools. According to an information flyer, the program was "interdisciplinary" and "involved both experiential and cooperative learning with a strong emphasis on creativity." Photography, debating and computer technology were infused into the curriculum to enrich what was being offered. The aim of the program was to extend student learning beyond the classroom through visits to museums, art galleries, and other cultural venues.

Students wishing to enter the ALP in Grade VII were selected. They were required to submit an application and write an entrance exam. Recommendations from the staff of the feeder schools were also considered. Retention in the program was not automatic. Students were obliged to reapply in subsequent grades. It was not uncommon for students to be reassigned to "a non-ALP classroom" at the end of the first year.

The Grade VII group I studied was comprised of 28 students. The teacher, one of the key participants in my study, worked with the students in both English and French language arts. Within her classes, specific projects were completed in collaboration with colleagues in other curriculum areas. Classes were scheduled according to the language of instruction, one in English and one in French per day. For the remainder of the school day, students pursued other subjects.

Methodology

My data emerged from a multiplicity of sources identified as primary, secondary and tertiary. Through "multi-sourcing" (Huberman & Miles, 1998), I established Mathison's (1988) notion of constructing "plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied" (p. 17). Multi-sourcing seemed to be a viable way to build plausibility because it helped to "develop, question, refine, and/or discard interpretations [of the data] and the underlying perspectives they reflect" (Metz, 2000, Spring, p. 62-63).

The primary source was three-tiered: namely observation, reflective writings (submitted by all study participants), and interviews. With each activity, contact with the teacher and students intensified. Collection of observation data continued throughout the school year (September-May) based on, where feasible, one visit per week. I viewed the collecting process as an "emergent sequence" design in which the data garnered from one activity pointed to the next. The data gathered from September to January was used to set up the reflective writings completed in January. The reflective writings, in turn, were cues for the interview questions. The interviews, conducted primarily from March to May of the school year, were a venue for exploring in greater depth what had been expressed in the reflections. I continued to record field notes, even while conducting other data collecting activities. The notes were invaluable for reflecting upon what I was observing. To further validate my data, I observed classroom activities from January to June of the following school year. Caution, I realized, had to be exercised. Another group of students brought different dynamics to the classroom and subsequently to my study. Yet, in my view, the juxtaposition of the two groups brought clarity to my interpretations.

The secondary sources of data collection were two-tiered. The first tier comprised of information gathered from sources other than my own. Such data took the form of artifacts distributed in class, as well as samples of student work. The second tier emerged from the *Student Engagement* project, a pan-Canadian study involving ten schools from across the country of which my "host" school was a participant (Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRocque, Portelli, Shields, Sturge Sparkes, & Vibert, 1998). Through my involvement in the project, I had already built a rich bank of knowledge about the school and the community. Although I had agreed to keep my own research separate from the *Student Engagement* project, it was inevitable that one would spill into the other.

My tertiary source was another local public school with a strong fine arts focus. The subsidiary site was introduced not so much as a point of comparison but for providing another context against which my observations could be juxtaposed.

Study Findings

My research suggests that, in the classroom, participation manifests itself in layers (Sturge Sparkes, 2005) reminiscent of Vibert and Shield's (2003) continuum. The first layer, I identify as "assigned participation" (p. 78). Student participation at this level occurs in learning situations in which classroom activities are largely "teacher initiated" (Mitra, 2003, p. 292). Teacher expectations propel student action, in both an individual and a collective sense. In short, students are often driven by the desire to please and to respond to the will of the teacher. Students displaying the characteristics of assigned participation are often learning in an environment in which, to quote McMahon (2003), "the teacher presents material in an interesting way or … uses a variety of strategies to convey information that the teacher deems important" (p. 260). In my study, the distinction between the individual and the group learner is evident when students are complying with the teacher's aim to provide "individualized competition and cooperative groupings." Assigned participation encompasses student responses to the teacher's strategies to fulfill her goals.

The next layer I categorize as "shared participation" (p. 78). In this layer, students appear to be taking a more active role in their learning. Whereas in assigned participation, students express the desire to comply with teacher expectations; in the dimension of shared participation, students are complying to a will of their own. Many in-class activities remain teacher-driven, yet students appear to be taking greater initiative by voicing opinions and making suggestions that the teacher takes seriously (Rudduck & Dimetriou, 2003). Behaviors displayed in the classroom suggest that "through active participation in knowledge production students [become] more involved in learning both the required and the other curriculum, and … consequently learn more successfully" (Thomson & Comber, 2003, p. 308). My observation aligns with Mitra's (2003) view that when a student has more control over her environment, she will feel more intrinsically motivated to participate.

A distinguishing feature in shared participation is the blurring between the learner as an individual and the learner as a group member. In keeping with hooks' (1994) holistic model of learning, there is evidence in this layer of stronger interaction among the students and the teacher, and less adherence to demarcation of roles.

In my study, some of the data revealed something else about participation. The data did not fit under participation as action, yet gave another dimension to my understanding of what I was seeing. The data spoke to me of an aspect of participation less tangible as it were, but very present. I could see it in the behaviors. I could

hear it in the words. There was a spirit there: that intangible feeling that made life in this particular classroom so special. The classroom appeared as a space where, to quote Palmer (1998), "the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard" (p. 151). Participating, beyond action either assigned or shared, exudes an emotive condition or state in which both students and teacher freely share of themselves. The space of learning plays out Jardine's (1998) words that, "none of us necessarily knows all by ourselves the full contours of the story each of us is living out" (p. 47). Sharing seems to go beyond merely exchanging ideas. The ambiance of the classroom embodies Kessler's (2000) phrasing of a meaningful connection, that is, "respect and care that encourages authenticity for each individual in the group" (p. 22). The presence of such a connection surrounds the action in the form of a dynamic or quality I categorize as "participative tone."

The tenor of the classroom, both seen and felt, speaks to Smith et al.'s (1998) notion of "full participation", that is the linkage between engagement in learning and understanding of the "other" in the school community context (p. 125). Members of that community strive to construct Wyness' (2000) view of a micro-society, a place where both teacher and student can draw on a variety of social strategies to feed their own learning. There is a fit between affirmation of one's own abilities and affirmation of the abilities of colleagues (Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003; Kessler, 2000). The students in my study were able to articulate what this meant to them.

And so I turn to the students for what they had to say. In their personal reflections and their interviews, the students revealed many things. Like Nieto (1994), I was "surprised at the depth of awareness and analysis" (p. 397) the students shared with me. They told me how they felt and at the same time pointed to what it was about their classroom that made them feel that way. In a sense what they told me was their story, certainly not in its complete form. But their words gave me tremendous insights into what life was like for them, at least their life in school. And in its own way, their story, even stories, gave me an inkling of where they wanted to go in the greater scheme of things. When presented with the opportunity, they had much to say. I reflect back upon Miriam Toew's (2001) interview with Leslee Silverman, artistic director of Winnipeg's Manitoba Theatre for Young People. In this interview Silverman states, "The universe is not made up of atoms, it's made up of stories" (p. 66). The remainder of this paper is dedicated to theirs.

Student Views of Participation

In the study I categorized student thoughts about participation in three data clusters: being active, being challenged, and being energized. As a point of clarification, to protect student identity, I have used the first initial of their names only.

Being Active

This cluster was of particular interest to me because the word "active" linked directly with my first research question. Although students did not use these words, a number of them differentiated between active and non-active learning, showing a strong preference for the former. "We take part in what we do. We have to take part," was P.'s response to the question about participation.

Some students referred to participative learning in terms of physical engagement. "We *do* things," stated A., emphasizing the word "do." It was clear that "doing" went beyond being confined to desks. "I like being in the ALP," penned one student, "because instead of just sitting around working, we do all kinds of stuff." "There's *always* participation," volunteered J. stressing the word "always" as she spoke. "You just don't sit there." L. described the learning as being a "body" experience. "It's very physical. You're not just sitting there reading out of a book." In keeping with the category title, one of the male students used the verb "act" in his response. "We get to act stuff out," declared G.

Other classmates, talked about participation in terms of an emotional commitment. "Participate? It means we really enjoy it, like wanting to fit in; wanting to do things," declared A. "We learn to think really quick," offered S., "just yell it out! It's fun to participate." R. affirmed …

> Everyone gets pumped up to do stuff. People don't sit in the corner and say, "This is so cheesy!" [She later explained to me that "cheesy" means, "It's so corny; so immature, so embarrassing…"]. Two more say, "It's so not boring" and five more say, "It's so fun." Everyone gets so hyper. We all want to do it.

Another student, M., added the dimension of sharing and collaboration to participation by introducing the descriptor "interactive." When pressed to tell me what she meant by the words, she replied, "Working together. Doing things that are 'hands on.'" J. added, "We get to know people more. Last year you tended to work

alone. We move in groups." A. concurred that, "You interact with the teacher and there-fore understand more. We express how we feel to classmates. We teach each other."

The students in my research had a sense of two kinds of learning. In contrast to what they were experiencing in the ALP classroom, non-active learning was often referred to as boring. "Other programs are really boring. They're not interesting," J. declared. "You don't really care what goes on." One student spoke of this type of learning as "plain learning." "It's much better than plain learning," declared S., "which can be pretty boring." In contrast to what they were doing in this course, J. referred to classes in previous years as being "normal." When I asked for clarification he explained "normal" as being "like last year. We didn't do anything special. We just worked."

Some students were very clear about what "plain" or "normal" learning entailed: Nieto's (1994) "chalk and talk" kind of learning where the teacher was heavily reliant on textbooks and blackboards (p. 405). "In another class nothing is fun," exclaimed J., "The teacher talks and talks and talks and gives us stencils." Students assured me that this was not the case in this classroom. "We do extra without sticking to the book," A. informed me. "We do different work in different ways," another col-league conceded.

Being Challenged

Some students described participation in terms of engaging in things that were challenging. They initially talked about it in their personal reflections. When the word was used, the students portrayed it in a positive light. M. wrote this comment in her reflection, "I think the ALP is a great program. This is because the students that want more of a challenge in their work can have it." T. raised this point: "I thought the work was going to be really hard, but it's not; it's just challenging like any work should be." The statement signaled to me that in his mind, at least, there was a decided dif-ference between work that was "challenging" and work that was "hard."

I felt this point was significant and required further investigation. When I raised the issue in the focus groups, S. compared a challenge to a "mystery puzzle." "You have to try to figure it out. You have to think it through." A colleague explained the difference in this fashion: "Challenging is you have to put your mind to it but you can do it. Hard … you put your mind to it but you can't figure it out." Other students added an emotional perspective to the difference between the two. "If I find some-thing challenging," declared L., "I enjoy learning about it. If it's hard 'it's a drag'!" R., another classmate, responded to the question with these words …

> If something is a challenge I feel I can get excited about it. I'm more up to it. If it's hard, I get frustrated. I'm pulling my hair out. "Oh no," I say to myself, "I can't do this!" You want to beat the challenge. If it's hard you feel you can't get it.

Some students described a challenge as being something they could deal with on their own. G. talked about a challenge as "something that may be hard at first, but if it's challenging, we can do it ourselves." A colleague in the same focus group echoed these sentiments. K. stated that "challenging is something I want to work on on your own, like fractions. It's hard at first, but after working on it you can say, 'I've got it!'" "Doing for yourself" was particularly appealing if the challenge was accompanied by choice. M. intimated that "if you find something hard you find it frustrating. If something is a challenge you have choices." T. explained …

> I like a good challenge because I want to do for myself. When I'm obligated to do something I don't want to do it as much. For example, in our debating I got to choose a topic I was interested in.

A number of students identified a task as a challenge if it connected with what they already knew. K. described a challenge as "you know it but you know you have to work towards it." A colleague, M., added to the discussion that when something is a challenge, "you build on experiences to try new stuff." Other students talked about challenge as building the capacity for future learning. J. stated, "I find that challenges make us work harder and work faster. It's improving how we work."

The comments showed the depth of understanding these students had about their learning. Even though they were unable to articulate the concept using "academic" language, they were, in my view, talking about metacognition, Nelson's (1999) notion of having "a feeling of knowing" (p. 626) or the "aboutness" of knowing (p. 625). Students seemed to feel that challenges were significant signposts to becoming better learners.

Some students, appearing to have an awareness of metacognition, voiced that challenges are not something to be avoided but to be welcomed. In one interview, R. appraised the English language arts course as one in which challenge was fun. "Challenging is drama," she conceded, "Freeze [a drama exercise played in the class] is thinking on your feet. You're having fun at the same time. Hard is 'I don't want to be doing this!'" "It's a good opportunity," surmised A., "If you don't get challenges you will not learn as much."

Being Energized

A number of the students described participating as involvement requiring a high energy level. In her personal reflection, R. wrote, "I really enjoy English [language arts] because it is extremely exciting. With debating, Shakespeare and drama, there is never a dull moment. After watching/listening to everyone around you, some of their enthusiasm is most likely to rub off on you." In their interviews, various classmates confirmed R.'s point of view. When asked to produce one word to describe the English language arts course, J. replied, "Energetic!" Another student, T. exclaimed, "Spontaneity!"

To some students, the fast pace of the course energized them. One student, whose name was not identified, wrote that in the course, "you get to go on many field trips; you learn very fast; you have fun with your friends; and you do lots of activities in the class." Various colleagues agreed. When asked to comment on a statement made in one of the personal reflections, B. explained, "I don't think we do it better. We do the same things as students in the regular program but we probably do it faster." "We work quicker than other classes," declared I. A colleague, however, took exception to the word "quicker" asserting that, "I would say rather than quicker we do it more efficiently. It doesn't take us as long to do it." A., I felt, encapsulated best his classmates' thoughts on this issue ...

> We go through things more quickly. We do a lot of work. We're always moving on to new things. It never gets boring. We're never dragging through the same thing …

In whatever way they defined it, students seemed to see participation as something that could not be done half-heartedly or apathetically. Participating, to some of them at least, demanded high energy and considerable commitment.

Student Views of Participation: A Summary

The students added to my understanding of participation, and, ultimately, of engagement. In their words I saw glimpses of assigned participation for both the individual learner and the group learner. I saw references to individual development of skills such as gathering information and questioning as well as the group perspectives of being on task and soliciting interaction. Interestingly, in their eyes participation seemed to be thought of as something unfolding more deeply: what I have

identified as shared participation. There was a strong sense of engagement. Students were involved because they wanted to and not because they had to. They were actors rather than passive observers of their learning. In a nutshell, they owned their learning. They had high expectations for what they wanted to get out of the learning experience. They were highly challenged and even energized by what they were doing. Most importantly, they expressed participation in terms of an emotional investment aligning with, but even adding to, my discussions of participative tone. The repeated use of the pronoun "we" in their statements affirmed this assertion.

Recent Student Voices

Understandings of engagement expressed by students in my study were confirmed in recent exchanges with students participating in various arts projects under the banner of ArtsSmarts. The ArtsSmarts program, funded over the last seven years by the McConnell Family Foundation, provides funding to schools to employ local artists to work collaboratively with classroom teachers. The aim of the program is to enable the artist and the teacher to develop and to implement an arts experience in the classroom curriculum.

A few months ago, I spoke with a student about her involvement in the ArtsSmarts project taking place in her elementary school. She described her learning as something she had separated into two distinct camps: the "usual" way and the "project" way. I asked her which way she preferred. Her eyes lit up as she responded, "Oh, this [the project] way, of course, because we *all* get to work together." In using the word "all," she was including the teachers, as well as the artists. It was amusing that during one of my visits to the same class, the teacher had to "order" students, who were working in self-selected groups on various dimensions of the project, to take their recess. Engagement, indeed!

The dancer described in the prologue, was a participant in an ArtsSmarts project in a regional high school. After observing the session, I met with the teacher who coordinated the project. She shared with me some of the reflections students had written about their experience. Students talked about the "endless possibilities of dancing" and what they had shared with each other. A colleague declared that, "This is not work for us" and further explained that the art experience exuded a passion that connected with their real lives. A senior student wrote wistfully that this is a second experience with an ArtsSmarts project; and that, "I wish I was in secondary school again next year to participate in another."

The words of the students call us to examine the role that the arts, and, in particular, the creative dimension of the arts, play in nurturing student engagement. The connection is well documented (Carley, 2005; Covington Soul, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2000; May, 1991; Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). It is, however, a discussion that warrants considerable attention not possible within the confines of this paper. Suffice it is to say, that in my own research, the arts need to take their rightful place in our organizations of learning. If they do not, the education we offer our youth is incomplete, even, if I might boldly declare, profoundly impoverished.

Epilogue

Engaged in their learning, students position themselves as both knower and actor. They move through the continuum: from resistance to compliance to collaboration, and on to self-liberation. "To know" in some detached sense is clearly not enough. In their voices, students reveal that meaning is embedded in context and derived from their own perceptions of what it is to learn. They acknowledge that "to know" in the truest sense is to engage in the simultaneous act of "pluralizing and individualizing the ways of knowing" (Gardner, 1991, p. 80). Students express this understanding. They unwrap the paradox. By accepting the multiplicity of knowledge, they embrace its peculiarity. They step into its dance with wonder and with joy.

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(Re) conceiving Student Engagement: What the Students Say They Want. Putting Young People at the Centre of the Conversation

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of student engagement has been recognised as a serious issue, especially in the middle years of schooling in Australian education. This qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences of one group of students beginning their high school years. Students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement. Traditionally they are objectified and omitted from the dialogue because often they are viewed as products of formal education systems. By giving voice to students, I compare and contrast the various and contested understandings of authentic or generative aspects of student engagement and what these might mean for classroom practice. I suggest that pedagogical practices that connect to students' lives are too often ignored but necessary elements of teacher pedagogy for all students, particularly, those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. I identify and examine three contesting epistemological constructs of student engagement in order to answer three interrelated questions: (i) What are the most worthwile conceptions of engagement? (ii) What are the purposes of engagement? (iii) Who benefits (and who is excluded) from these purposes? I conclude that not all forms of student engagement are equal.

Introduction

*E*ngagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing (Newmann, 1986, p 242).

Pedagogical practice always implies a struggle over assigned meaning, a struggle over discourse as the expression of both form and content, as struggle over the interpretation of experience and a struggle over "self". But it is this very struggle that forms the basis of a pedagogy that liberates knowledge and practice. It is a struggle that makes possible new knowledge that expands individual experience and, hence, redefines our identities and the real possibilities we see in the daily conditions of our lives. The struggle is itself a condition basic to the realization of a process of pedagogy: it is struggle that can never be won—or pedagogy stops. It is the struggle through which new knowledge, identities, and possibilities are introduced that may lead to the alteration simultaneously of circumstance and selves (Simon, 1992, p. 69).

This paper is a part of research that analyses, through the voices of teachers and students, changing pedagogical practices in one school. Informed by Haberman's *Pedagogy of Poverty* (1991) and Shor's *Empowering Pedagogies* (1987, 1992, 1996), I suggest that resistance is not the antithesis but rather, the contradictory act of engagement, while accommodation is a self-protective negative agency in response to unequal power relations. Three contesting constructions of student engagement previously identified (Zygier, 2004) are examined through the (often but not necessarily) contesting and resisting voices of teachers and students. In conclusion, I ask how might we (re) conceive student engagement in order to achieve the twin goals of social justice and academic achievement (Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003) through an empowering and resistant pedagogy.

Methodology

As part of an action research project involving the pedagogical development and change of a team of teachers in a disadvantaged, working class state high school, I analysed multiple forms of data that included narratives from semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, as well as, teacher self-surveys of their pedagogy. Beachside Secondary College is a public (government) school of some 800 students from Year 7 to Year 12 located in the southeast bay-side region of Melbourne. The school began as a state technical (vocational) school in 1968 largely serving the population of the surrounding low-rise public housing community. In 1986, it was compulsorily and reluctantly amalgamated with the neighbouring academic high school during a period of forced school closures and amalgamations.

I interviewed the teachers individually. Students, in their first year of high school, were interviewed in small focus groups, one group for each teacher's class. The students were asked to reflect on their teachers' attempts to modify their pedagogies in an endeavour to engage them. This empirical, qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences of one group of students beginning their high school years.

Students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement since, as Murphy (2001) claims, they are frequently looked upon as the products of formal education systems. By giving voice to students, I compare and contrast the various and, sometimes contesting, understandings of what authentic or generative student engagement might mean for both school and classroom practice. I argue that a pedagogical practice that connects to the real life of all students, including those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, is an often-ignored, but necessary, element of teacher pedagogy. The student voices are privileged here. They are given the opportunity, together with their teachers, to enter into the discourse about the contrasting and sometimes conflicting views of what student engagement looks like in their classrooms. This paper seeks to understand not only how student engagement is defined by teachers and students, but how it is enacted in the classroom. That is, whether it replicates the status quo or strives for equity and social justice.

The challenge of student engagement has been recognised as a serious issue, especially in the middle years of schooling in both Australian and Canadian education. Vibert & Shields (2003) define engagement as:

> …a continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches to those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic worldview…not only is this a descriptive continuum, but …a move from the rational, through the interpretivist, to a more critical understanding, …a more socially grounded construction of "engagement." (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 237)

At the beginning of the 21st Century, there has been a significant interest in and concern with student retention, participation and achievement rates in post-compulsory schooling within Western education systems. By way of response, governments and schools have developed many programs that aim to improve engagement and, ultimately, educational outcomes for all students, particularly those identified as being "at-risk of disengagement."

Curriculum that is relevant to the needs and interests of students is important (Zyngier, 2003). But it also matters what teachers do with respect to student learning. The research of Newmann (1996), Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka (2001), and Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Bahr, Chant, Warry et al. (2001) suggests that certain pedagogies can have positive effects on student engagement in learning, even for those students who are at risk of academic failure. There is growing evidence that teacher change that modifies the quality of the pedagogical experiences for their students may result in quantitative improvements in both academic achievement and recognitive social justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000). Recognitive social justice is concerned not just with the redistribution of goods and services, but also a rethinking of social arrangements that are currently accepted as just, giving status to action that is currently thought to be counterproductive and decentering concerns thought to be pivotal (Gale, 2000, p. 253). This assertion does not suggest that teachers are *the* difference, or alternatively, *the* problem in relation to student achievement (Gale, 2006). Hattie (2003) claims that teachers contribute about 30% to student achievement and stresses that "it is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation" (Hattie, 2003, p. 2). Hattie emphatically adds:

> Schools barely make a difference to achievement. The discussion on the attributes of schools—the finances, the school size, the class size, the buildings are important as they must be there in some form for a school to exist, but that is about it (Hattie, 2003, p. 2).

While Instrumentalist and socio-constructivist research suggests—influenced in turn by retributive and redistributive understandings of social justice—that student outcomes are most influenced by students' home background and individual characteristics, Rowe (2004a) concludes that these have less than 10% of the variance:

> The magnitude of these effects pales into insignificance compared with class/ teacher effects. That is, the *quality of teaching and learning provision* are by far the most salient influences on students' cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes of schooling, *regardless of …student background*. (Rowe, 2004, p. 4 [emphasis in original]).

Contesting Discourses of Engagement

The phrase "engagement in school" or "student engagement" is often cited as an essential component of programmatic interventions for at-risk students. However, there have been very few attempts to define engagement, other than behaviourally, or to study it as part of the learning process. Researchers acknowledge that definitions of engagement encompass a wide variety of constructs that "can help explain how children behave, feel and think in school" (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel & Paris, 2003, p. 6). The definitions are commonly a mix of (i) behavioural aspects, (ii) affective or emotional feelings, and, (iii) cognitive engagement that includes motivation, effort, and strategy use.

Much of the research essentialises engagement, portraying it, and the academic success that accompanies it, as a function of the individual, ignoring the contribution of gender and socio-cultural, ethnic, and economic status (class) factors. Finn's (1989) participation/identification model has been readily adopted in Australia (Fullarton, 2002) and is characterised by associating lack of engagement with poor academic performance. According to this view, as schools become more effective, students are more engaged and academic performance is thus improved (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). These views portray student engagement as something that teachers can organise *for them* and do *to them* (Luse, 2002, emphasis added). This concept of student engagement does not take into account that some students may be playing by the rules of the game as described by Haberman (1991).

Students who reject (for any reason) the values of the school are generally labelled as alienated or disengaged. Schlechty (2002) recognises that even students who withdraw or retreat are making conscious decisions about their schooling.

Where engagement is narrowly defined as "willingness to become involved in teacher-initiated tasks" and is separated from the students' socioeconomic and cultural contexts, engagement is, by and large, viewed as the responsibility of the teacher. But if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student. I would argue that this correlation between participation and achievement is a misinterpretation made by the proponents of Finn's participation/identification model (Fullarton, 2002). The reification of this definition of student engagement results in the identification and measurement of only those conditions that seem to encourage or impede it.

Social Justice and Engagement: Three Contesting Perspectives

Previously I (Zyngier, 2004) described three dominant perspectives accounting for engagement as (i) instrumentalist or rational technical, (ii) social constructivist or individualist, and, (iii) critical transformative. Each of these discourses is situated within the contesting teacher and student voices from Beachside Secondary.

Instrumentalist or Rational Technical

An instrumentalist or rational technical understanding of student engagement is fundamentally objectivist. It focuses on counting the number of students who are involved in either curricular (such as being on task or completing assigned work) or in extracurricular activities. Minimal or no attempt is made to "go beneath the surface": that is, to understand the meaning that students make of the activity or their motivation to participate.

Teachers at Beachside are committed and well intentioned, exhibiting initiative and effort to involve students in numerous activities. Built on teacher initiation, that is, *doing to* or *for*, rather than *doing with*:

> These activities are common to most schools and are illustrative of teachers trying, in various ways to develop both pedagogical and social activities in which students may be both involved and interested (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 227).

A dominant deficit view prevails among many of the teachers reflecting the attitude that students and parents are either competent or capable because of their background. For example, Dom puts all the "blame" on the students or their background because they:

> ...become disengaged, or are not interested in doing it, of course, because it is too difficult. Other things [that cause lack of engagement] don't involve anything in this room or in this classroom … because of factors that don't involve the teacher. It could be external issues. … I have students that come to class and I don't think that much would engage them because they have some injury or some incident outside the school that distracts them. … I don't think a classroom teacher can help much. I think that it goes back to diet and habits at home, how they prepare themselves … before they come to school, … the

home, … the TV watching that goes on, the family situation. … you can almost see from the student, … what the family is going to be like as well.

In my research, students entering a new school after seven years of primary education shared many of the common (usually baseless) fears about going to the "big school." All the students interviewed were convinced that the level of academic work was not going to be just harder and greater, but also challenging and exciting. Most of the students had expected that the level and volume of academic work at Beachside would be dramatically increased from what they had previously experienced. A student commented that:

> *I thought it would be a lot harder and a lot more work … and more challenging for me. …I thought I was going to get more homework … and go home and have to stay up late and finish all our homework.*

Yet the students interviewed were insistent that teachers were giving them work that was far too easy for them. A number of students expressed disappointment that the work was not as varied or as difficult as they had thought it would be such that:

> *I just want some hard work … Year 7 isn't as hard as I thought it would be. It is usually the same as primary school, the same work, it is not that hard really. Some of the fast workers like me get our work done. The teachers have nothing for us to do and we have to sit there and do nothing. …I found grade 6 harder … like it was more challenging because I knew I didn't want to get kept down, in primary school it was harder for me. …I have to say year 7 isn't harder (from various students).*

Despite identification that their own engagement was important to their outcomes, many students accepted that some of the work, even if it did not offer an instant interest to them at this stage, would be of benefit to them in the future. hooks (2003) suggests that "many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives… They have learned … that book learning offered … has no relevance in the world outside …" (hooks, 2003, p. 42). Even though they are only just beginning secondary school, students were already considering the long term benefits of academic success. The danger here is that gratification delayed may become gratification denied, leading to, at best, passive or ritualistic engagement or, at worst, retreatist, rebellious, or resistant forms of engagement (Schlechty, 2002). Various students commented that:

Not every work is fun, like some things can be boring but you have got to do it…. You need to get used to the homework because you are going to get a lot of it in year 12 and 11. I get bored with the maths, but I still do it - I know that I need a good education to get into university and to pass year 12. I don't like it but I still do it. When you do harder work you understand more. I just try my hardest at it because I don't know yet what I want to do when I am older, but I want to go to Uni[versity] and I know you need good marks to be able to get into Uni, so I try my hardest at everything.

Some of the teachers located the problem in the background of the student as exemplified in Sally's words…

Their skills are so weak, they are frighteningly weak, that these children can't read … we have really got to work on their basic skills. How can they go off and research independently when they can't read?

Their parents too are reduced to being passive recipients of school-based programs rather than being empowered to be active partners in their children's educational development (Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRocque, Portelli, Shields, Sturge Sparkes, & Vibert, 2001, p. 132). Their style of pedagogy is typical of what Giroux (1994) criticised as "education for slackers" and Lingard (2006) as "pedagogies of indifference."

Shor (1987) concludes that "through this vast vocational matrix, the great majority of the working class pass, getting a narrow skills-on-the-job training which is identified as education" (p. 25). Clearly these teachers separate the curriculum from the every-day concerns of the students, where academic studies are separated from self-concept and behaviour (Vibert, Portelli J, Shields, & Laroque, 2002). They are not prepared—as Giroux suggests is essential—"to fashion alternative analyses in order to understand what is happening to youth" (Giroux, 1994, p. 210).

Social Constructivist or Individualist Engagement

Social constructivist or individualist engagement is a more student-centred pedagogy. It envisages engagement as implicit in active learning where students experience self-motivation, reflective and shared goal setting, and choice. This notion of engagement certainly produces more dignified and interesting classrooms. However, it does not necessarily raise substantive (and critical) student inquiry that questions the acceptance of official knowledge (Apple, 1993) for all students, not just

those of the middle class. Some Beachside teachers share this view of engagement as demonstrated in Theo's thoughts:

> I think the more we can pour our energies into helping individual students [the better but] I think the other thing too we are trying to teach en masse some will pick it up, some won't. The ones that pick it up … are the independent learners that have the skills to go about learning and I guess our job is to bring more of those students that aren't able to, to get them to the level.

Shor (1992) points out that situating learning in the students' subjectivity and relating the subject area to student experience must be the "starting point, [followed by] the social context of the larger culture, and the academic context" (Shor, 1992, p. 145). Teachers can be well meaning, but often unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes about the capabilities of, in this case, working class and recently arrived migrant students who they feel inevitably lower school standards. Such teachers believe they have to lower standards for these "backward students" (hooks, 2003, p. 17).

Some Beachside teachers equate engagement with compliance to and participation in pre-determined adult rules and adult-led activities. This form of engagement produces underachievement by marginalised students who actively "resent and resist an alien culture imposed on them" (Shor, 1992, p. 202). The words of the teacher identified as Sally voices Shor's concerns. She concludes that for her students, the "culture of schooling has failed to train them in the dominant discourse and practices" (Shor, 1992, p. 203) and says:

> There is a disregard for education, there is lack of respect for themselves, for their peers, for authority. I was hoping that we would have that opportunity to mould them, mould the children … because … they don't value education.… I think it is really important that our students know how to fit into society.

Vibert and Shields (2003), echoing Sefa Dei (2003), claim that the student alone cannot interrupt officially sanctioned discourses since "the right choices are powerfully inculcated in institutional habits, routines … what in this context might student choice mean?" (p. 7) in a system of schooling where domination is perpetuated. Shor (1987) comments that:

> Powerlessness results from feeling overwhelmed by an oppressive yet incomprehensible system. The contradictory presence and elusive aspects

of social control lead to confusion about what freedom is or what the means are to be free, happy and whole. (p. 56-57)

This reality is exemplified when Sally introduced the animated film *Shrek* with:

Now you have all got to shut up and listen because you are going to do a project on this. You know … the person who said it would know that that wouldn't be the right way to present it, obviously, but sometimes when the kids are screaming … you just say things without thinking.

In such a situation, shared decision-making is an illusion for students when they are unable to question and overcome their own marginalisation. Haberman (1991) indicates that in such situations low self-esteem can cause even brilliant students to self-sabotage. As Dom indicates:

I can be as compassionate as possible, working within a group of 25 students, and then when other students see that compassion, not so much compassion, favouritism I guess you can call it, in their eyes, then they jack up.

Student-centred or social constructivist engagement defaults to a conservative position and "may become simply a more friendly method of encouraging on-task behaviour" (Vibert and Shields, 2003, p. 8). So while a student remarks...

No one really likes Miss because she like yells at us for nothing and gives us detention for nothing and it just gets annoying.

His teacher explains that:

I think it is really important that we do explain and help them to see why they are doing it. The notion 'let the child decide what they want to learn' I just don't think they know what they want or they certainly don't know what they need to know.

Shor (1992) explains that even when students "trust the good intentions" of teachers, they have "already learned in traditional classes that a good student keeps quiet and agrees with the teacher" (p. 93). Too often in student-centred teaching, teachers make uncritical or make-believe connections between classroom learning

and the world outside of the school. In this situation, as Theo explains, a teachers design activities that:

> Initially I thought … would be engaging because I thought … it would be interesting or engaging enough to maybe do a bit more in depth unit on it. But because they had done it before, they seemed to say … it's boring.

Contrary to the "commonsense view" (McDonald, 2002) of constructivist pedagogy, Goodman (1992) and Shor (1996) suggest that this approach often promotes a false student-centredness. Teachers perceive this work to be engaging because they "simulate real-world environments … so that students can carry out authentic tasks as real workers would …" (Day, 2002, p. 23). Sing and Luke (1996) caution that pedagogy based on "unproblematic notions of individualism and liberalism which attempt to recognise and celebrate difference per se" (p. xiii) can actually conceal pedagogical practices that are the cause of inequality of opportunity and outcomes for the disadvantaged in schools. Etta, the Student Coordinator at Beachside, understood this connection.

> I found it really difficult that teachers were teaching this stuff but they weren't making any connections and perspectives of how that reflects in the real world and why they needed to do that.

Shor (1987) criticises this individualist pedagogy because it fails to problematise the examination of a real context drawn from student experience without criticizing his/her daily life. Many of Etta's colleagues assign engagement to the individual student leading to an essentialisation and reification of engagement. Students (teachers and the community) are, therefore, engaged when the school is an engaging place, but as Sally explains, because...

> The students we get here are weak, just incredibly weak ... we have to look at various ways in which we can approach our subjects to engage the kids and to develop their skills in the area.

Critical—Transformative Engagement

Thus, student-centred pedagogy sees engagement through student exploration and discovery of individual interests and experiences. Critically transformative or generative pedagogy, on the other hand, (Zyngier, 2003) defines student engagement as a rethinking these experiences and interests in communal and social terms

for the purpose of creating a more just and democratic community, not solely for the advancement of the individual. All students should be able to see themselves represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations existing between different social groups. Pedagogical reciprocity acknowledges that the lives of children and their communities are a curriculum of life (Smith et al., 1998, 2001), not just connected to student experience, but also actively and consciously critiquing the experience. This "situated teaching from everyday life" (Shor, 1992, p. 44) rejects the superficial fixation on student interest that Shor (1992) describes as a "static entrapment in what students already know and say. What students bring to class is where the learning begins. It starts there and goes places" (p. 44). One teacher, Nelly, realised that:

> I … found a whole heap of things [that] they knew … that they didn't think that they knew. Like they had these realisations of this knowledge and kids are like "I know that." … they had this knowledge but they had never realised they had it.…[I]t wasn't packaged, like normally a kid will come in and go "in science I know this" and this wasn't information that was packaged in their head, it was just in there, … I think that is where you notice how much other things outside influence and that is the information that they don't have packaged up.

A colleague, Shelley, realizes that the teacher is responsible for reversing passiveness and provoking involvement, and understands the cognitive and affective levels of the class into which serious study is situated (Shor, 1992, p. 54). She suggests that what is important is for students to:

> ...feel safe and supported in the classroom, that relationship stuff is really important and talking an interest in them, not just yelling at them because they are late to the class.

Some students recognised that they were not as engaged in the secondary high school as they had been at the primary level. They identified a number of possible reasons for this.

> *She (the teacher) comes up and yells in your face and it is like you don't want to be there. ...Well everyone doesn't like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn't listen to what she says. ...always yelling and … cranky. Favouring other students and not having enough work prepared. ...She is always going off at kids for doing something wrong and we are not getting as much help as we want.*

They also suggested disruption caused by other students prevents engagement.

> *They [other students] don't really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don't really learn what they are supposed to, so the work is hard for them.*

Sometimes the work is too easy and and repeats work already done.

> *Teachers have to explain it to us so that we actually know, like if they don't explain it to us properly, not like "here you go."*

The students were quite clear that if they could see a purpose to learning, they would be more likely to do the work, even if it was something in which they were not particularly interested. Reflecting Haberman's (1991) critique that classroom practice is not necessarily determined and imposed by the teacher, students commented that:

> *It is just basically if you crack it you are better off out there because you can calm down. If the teachers get really frustrated … they will make you come back inside. The teachers usually decide, but if you are in a bad mood and you walk out, they will decide whether they want to come and get you, or whether you can calm down and then they will come and get you.*

Haberman (1991) raises the problematic stance that disadvantaged students are most likely to reject out-of-hand (at least initially) new approaches that include intellectually challenging work in favour of repetitive, non-challenging and educationally debilitating work. A student noted this type of situation:

> *There are people that try and ruin class time to [just] get out of it.*

Sally, his teacher, responded with words reminiscent of transmissive or instrumentalist discourse:

> *I know that if you write notes on the board and say "nobody goes until they are done" they are little angels and they will just sit there and copy it out but we all know that while we are doing that, we are doing it to buy ourselves a bit of respite.…[W]e know that they are not learning anything doing that, so I don't want to teach like that. But the minute you just relax, actually … lighten up a little bit … mayhem breaks out, so you go back to your little tight*

world again. They are just a nasty group, they are horrible to each other, there is incredible bullying and misery, they are just not nice. … [this class] couldn't give a damn. No they couldn't care less.…I really do not know what to do to engage those students. I would say with all their teachers we have all tried a myriad of approaches but we are not getting anywhere, I don't know what the answer is.

Another student added this about Sally.

Everyone doesn't like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn't listen to what she says and she goes and gets the co-ordinator and she comes and talks to us, or goes off at us or something.

This sort of demonisation where teachers see students always as their enemy makes the teacher part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Sally may already hate her job and her students, feeling that the classroom situation has become pathological (Schlechty, 2002) and that disciplinary issues are making it impossible to teach. Not only does she feel doomed, says hooks (2003), but she is:

…condemned to stay in the prison of work she no longer [seems] to want to do … the students she teaches are also condemned, compelled to remain in a setting where the only hope of learning is the gaining of information from formulaic lesson plans (p. 15).

If it is correct that teachers often operate in a classroom with an unwritten contract (Haberman, 1991) of "don't stress me and we won't disrupt your class," then change cannot be found solely in modifying the curriculum. Lynn, who the students rate as "a good teacher," reflects that:

First of all, there are particular teachers that need to admit that their classes aren't operating the way that they want to. I have found that to be a little bit disheartening sometimes that you can quite clearly see that something wrong is happening in the classroom, something is going on that shouldn't be but the teachers response is "oh no, it is ok, it's fine" that has been frustrating.

While Sally is obviously disillusioned with teaching, Lynn takes a different standpoint, one that while revealing a "strange and threatening landscape … moves beyond illusion, so that [she] sees reality in the round—since what we are able to see

depends entirely on where we stand" (Palmer as cited in hooks, 2003, p. 20-21). Haberman (1991) suggests that marginalized students may still resist such efforts even when the teacher intends to create opportunities for improved educational out-comes (McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 361). Recognizing this, Nelly commented that:

> They resist it because they don't understand it, like the way that I grew up or the way I see the world now or the way I live isn't the way that they see the world, isn't the influences that they have.

Kanpol's (1997a) research into similar "cynical eighth graders" describes the coping strategies of students as a counter-hegemonic agenda, that is, as forms of institutional, political resistance noted by both teachers and students at Beachside.

> The students that would not normally play up do, there is a lot of movement around the classroom. They tend to push the boundaries knowing that there is a different teacher in the classroom.

> *It is just some people, they crack it so much in the class, they will walk out, … it doesn't happen all the time but some people, they just think they are having a bad day. They crack it with the teacher and they go into a bad mood because they are getting frustrated and they slam the door.*

Counter-hegemonic resistance is mainly concerned with breaking rules, use of oppositional language and developing survival mechanisms that challenge authority. Institutional resistance is the result of subordinated groups forming "com-munity on the basis of shared negative beliefs and understandings about oppression … even as [students] identify ways the dominating culture keeps them down" (hooks, 2003, p. 73). They reinforce that power by seeing themselves only as victims perpetu-ating their own oppression as students who have lost "sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of power" (hooks, 2003, p. 73). As one student surmised:

> *For a lot of them it would be, because they don't really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don't really learn what they are supposed to.*

Lynn (the teacher) offered this perspective.

> There is one particular student that is probably the smartest kid in the class, but he fails to hand in work on time, he does not complete homework as well. I think students know that they are breaking the rules and understand the

implications as to what will happen but do not care. I think a difficult class is one that does not want be there and does not want to learn.

Another student added:

> *It is very noisy because none of us like the teacher and we just all crack it and we just do whatever we want and don't listen to the teacher.*

"Confirmation bias" (hooks, 2003) sees that some teachers identify certain students as being less capable than others. These students begin to perform in ways that will satisfy the teacher's low expectations. The "pygmalion effect" (Rosenthal, & Jacobson, 1968) is clearly evident at Beachside:

> I have got quite a few students in my class that are not against throwing a chair if it means, and they have learnt this over years at school as well, they behave really poorly, you get sent out, you get suspended, they learn the system really quickly.…Some of these kids just don't want to be involved in what is going on.…They get in there and you are doing an activity that they don't like, or they have had a rough day and they just don't want to be involved. Some of the kids will do anything they can to get out of it, and they know how to get out of it.

Many of Beachside's teachers seem more comfortable with mediocrity because this serves as confirmation of what hooks (2003) refers to as a "deep seated belief in the [students'] inferiority" (p. 89). Dom concluded that:

> If your students can't achieve what you expect them to achieve, just give them grade four work, they will succeed at that and say, well I have done my job. If our students have level four numeracy there is just no point forcing them to learn year 7 work if they have missed something.

Student resistance, therefore, can be distinguished from a more critical "substantive counter-hegemony of cultural political resistance" (Kanpol, 1997b, p. 5). In this form of resistance, students see themselves as represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations existing between different social groups. Resistance can, however, turn to counter-hegemonic engagement through generative connectedness "found in the unsettled intersections of personal life and society" (Shor, 1992, p. 55). This type of engagement can be achieved through a focus on problems from student experience that is intellectually challenging, and a critical

reflection that goes beyond opinion. Such engagement can be "problematic enough to inspire students to do intellectual work" (Shor, 1992, p. 5), even among "basic-skills" students. Nelly, perceiving that a resolution to this resistance is possible, comments that:

> They have such skewed understanding of what is going on around them that you really need to base it on things that they understand and the things that begin are possibly the things that they feel comfortable with because jumping outside their comfort zone with some of our kids is not the best way to start something off.

Nelly takes student culture and connectedness seriously where other teachers may explicitly disagree with students and are prepared to argue student choices with them. Nelly understands that "empowering education is initiated and directed by a critical teacher but is democratically open to student intervention" (Shor, 1992, p. 85). She is of the opinion that:

> If the students are engaged then they have an awareness of what is happening around them and an awareness of their options, and that is what I personally think engagement is all about.

In keeping with Haberman's (1991) view, students at Beachside were not interested in just having fun all the time but did want to be challenged as evident in the following comment.

> *I think it is because we get bored, most of the time.*

Some of the teachers at Beachside, particularly Shelley and Nelly, recognised that they were being transformed as they taught students and as they learned from them. Such pedagogical reciprocity:

> ...disconfirms unilateral authority [and] by accepting student discipline, a power-sharing teacher then becomes democratically (not institutionally) authorised to make higher demands on the students because students have been authorised to make higher demands on the teacher (Shor, 1996, p. 125).

Lack of student engagement was clear even to the students. Many felt that students "acted up" to get out of classes they found to be boring, and that some teachers were not effective in preventing these incidents within their classrooms. Low self-esteem tended to lead students to what hooks (2003) calls "self-sabotage" (p. 18). Failing to provide challenging work for capable students led them to becoming involved in disrupting others as suggested in these words.

> *They (worksheets) are just put on our tables and they just say "work" and make us work until the bell goes…. I get bored after work, when I have finished all my work and I start getting bored and restless and throwing things around…. The teacher is too busy telling off the people that are shouting, they don't have enough time to come to you and help you.*

Sometimes students seem to give up hope and do poorly in their work. They take on "… a mantle of victimhood. They fail. They dropout. Most of them have no guides to teach them how to find their way in the educational systems" (hooks 2003, p. 48). When schools are structured to maintain domination, they have within them subcultures of resistance where education "as the practice of freedom still happens" (hooks, 2003, p. 48). Students, in this study, recognised the need for greater teacher control. They observed that removing students from the class often resulted in more disruption to other classes.

> *And with other teachers they are like "Come in here" we are noisy and they give us a warning and they remind us again and it is like you are in for deten-tion, the whole class, and with others they… teach us for a little while and then we get a bit noisy or people don't want to work and they just give up and they sit there looking.*

Students who would otherwise stay on task became disruptive when teach-ers were not seen to be in control. Some students even mentioned that they were frightened to come to school because of the disruption. Students, however, were able to identify teachers and teaching pedagogies that effectively engaged them in their learning. They wanted teachers to learn from each other about what works.

> *Lynn teaches us literacy and English and she helps everyone and all that and when we do reading with her she puts us in different groups so that everyone is up to their own reading level.*

Teachers must change their pedagogical practices so that they deliver authentic pedagogy inequitable ways to all students regardless of gender, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity (Newmann, 1996). It is incumbent on the teacher to become knowledgeable about the students she or he teaches and to structure curriculum around student experiences (Shor, 1992). Only a minority of Beachside teachers, however, expressed that transformative engagement was something for which teachers were responsible.

> A good teacher does his or her homework first, student engagement starts off with… finding tasks that will keep the class really interested and student engagement is about self directed learning as well, and about clarity. If students know exactly what they have to do, why they have to do it and how they will be assessed, they are a lot more engaged then in photocopying a section out of a textbook, coming into class and saying "read this and answer these questions" because they can't link it to anything.

Etta acknowledged this differentiation clearly recognising that transformative engagement has the potential to disrupt the comfort zone of "confirmation bias"…

> I look at the older teachers in our staffroom who are more senior … they are more mature and … from a [different] cultural background, I think that they should have had some sort of leadership role … but they were as clueless as any of us.

Increasing Engagement: Student Views

All the students in this project could give examples of the kind of work and activities that made it easier to learn and that made them more likely to be attentive in class. These views are reflected in the following:

> *I would make it easier so that kids can get their say in what they do, because sometimes teachers don't listen.... They made sure everyone knew how to do it. They won't go on with the work until they knew everyone knew how to do it.... To have 3 separate groups of intelligence levels for like how smart we are at maths or English.... To just jump ahead and learn as much as you can, get motivated.... The most enjoyable projects and all that we do would have to be*

the hands on stuff.... [I want] a classroom where there are big tables and zero noise.

Students also expressed ideas that they felt teachers could use to make the lessons more rewarding. Interestingly, many of these were also suggested by some of the staff interviewed. As Etta indicated:

I am learning and I know that makes them learn too. They know that I am excited and they feel that I am involved so they keep wanting to learn because I keep wanting to learn. I don't say, "I am high and mighty, I am the teacher, you should find out." I tell them very honestly, "I don't really know, I have been learning just like you and I am still learning so you have to learn with me."

The few teachers who recognised the potential of transformative engagement to counter domination understood the value of risk. They saw that "the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative, but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict" (hooks, 2003, p. 64), and like the students at Beachside, suggested that teachers need to "challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing their knowledge, and to learn a diversity of styles to convey information" (p. 43).

A minority of Beachside teachers recognized that students should not only be valued, but they need to be given the opportunity to voice and discover their "own authentic and authoritative life in order to retrieve the learning agenda" (Giddens, 1994, p. 121). Such teachers understood that "the individual can act" and that his or her actions "have weight" (hooks, 2003). The more authority exercised by students, the more legitimacy is given to the authority of the teacher. In turn, students then have "less reason to sabotage the class and their own intellectual development" (Shor, 1996, pp.125-126). As the most transformative teacher at Beachside, Shelley commented that:

If the students are able to voice their opinions right from the start and get clear in their minds what their peers are saying about what they are doing, then students become more engaged.

Conclusion

Important work is currently being undertaken in Australia (and elsewhere) on the kinds of pedagogies that improve outcomes for all students, (Lingard et al., 2001a; Lingard et al., 2001b; Newman et al., 2001) particularly those labelled as being at-risk of leaving school early, as disadvantaged, and/or from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

An engaging or "core" pedagogy should ensure that what teachers and students do involves *connecting* to and engaging with the students' cultural knowledge; *owning* or ensuring all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work; *responding* to students' lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience; and *empowering* students with a belief that what they do will make a difference in their lives and giving them the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life.

It is too simplistic to define engagement in terms of student deficiencies. Historically, the disengaged were those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities and family structures were unlike to the dominant (white, middle-class) culture that schools were designed to serve and support (Hickson & Tinzman, 1990; Alexander, 2000; hooks, 2003). The struggle over the definition of the term engagement is significant in itself for it reveals the ongoing ideological and epistemological divisions among educators, policy makers, and the general public. Research on student dis/engagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, power, history and, particularly, students' lived experiences and social reality reveal a complex set of factors that lead marginalised youth to leave school prematurely. It is, therefore, crucial that questions of power, equity, and engagement be addressed if we are to improve learning outcomes, not just for the most marginalised youth, but for all. This research suggests that the complexity of issues related to student engagement (and early school leaving), does not fit neatly into decontextualized accounts of youth experience, school interaction and socio-environmental factors—factors that create in the first instance student disempowerment and disengagement with school. Transformative student engagement is empowering. It develops a sense of entitlement, belonging, and identification where teachers, to quote hooks (1994), "create pedagogical practices that engage students providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply" (p. 22). Otherwise, students are still "doing time, not doing education" (Sefa Dei, 2003, p. 251).

Notes

1. Teacher names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants and are quoted in Times font while student comments are in Times Italic font. All other quotations are in Arial font.

2. The analysis of the programmatic discourse in relation to understanding how the term engagement is used in education department and government policy documentation is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. All teacher names are pseudonyms. Teachers were individually interviewed in September, 2004, while all students are not named as their quotations come from group interviews in June, 2004.

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LINKS:

http://education.qld.gov.au/public_media/reports/curriculum-framework/qsrls/

http://www.education.monash.edu.au/profiles/dzyngier

With Middle Schoolers Slogging in a Cypress Slough

Anne McCrary Sullivan, National-Louis University

They line up in columns, face a dark water, know that it's cold.
"Your chaperone will lead your group."
I have no chaperone. I slog free. I wish I had a net.

Philosophically they wade in. "We'll get used to it." "Yeah, we'll get used to it."
Soon among cypress trunks, ferns, air plants, their orange vests bloom.
I'm blooming, too – cold water wicking up my jeans.

An orchid there. But they are looking for bladderwort.
"It's got to have clumps below it. Here it is! Nah."
They reach into tangles of floating vegetation, dip with their nets,

peer over buckets. "I got something huge, it's two inches long,
look, there's two of them! Omigosh, one is eating the other!
Or maybe they're mating, I don't know."

Stepping like a water bird, I use a stick to feel my way
through submerged roots, cypress knees, logs. A stork feather
floats among small rainbows, oil of plant cells bursting.

When Ranger Heather calls us to a soggy congregation,
light floats and puddles at our shins. Our feet, our legs
have all forgotten the water is cold. We circle and bow

to the mayfly nymph, then release her to her home
and slog our way out through marl and tea, single file
like nuns or monks, probing ahead of us with sticks, chanting.

Anne McCrary Sullivan

In the Third Grade Museum
of Ancient Civilizations

o Not Touch. This vase shows olives
which the Greeks used two ways… to eat
and for hair, to make it shiny. That's why
I made this vase, because of the olives.
For this ancient mask, I used clay, beads,
cotton balls, marbles, and a pipe cleaner.
So, you see how I made my artifacts.
This is the Temple of the Acropolis.
This is my name in Greek.

Welcome to China. This is the Great Wall
built to keep their enemies out,
built by Emperor Qui Shi Huangdi—
notice, it's pronounced Chee-Sherr-Hwan-gdi—
and this is the cart where the emperor hid
to keep from dying.

In ancient India, in the Indus River valley,
docent Kai displays the blue mud hut he made
of clay, its ladder to the roof, the trap door entrance.
And this is just a little pot.
This is a game, kind of like checkers.
These are the Himalayas with snowy peaks.

In Rome I learn that Rich Romans wore clothes with color.
The poor wore white, all they could afford. Near
the Tiber River, stands poor Roman Barbie draped

in white cotton fabric, loose threads. I get confused,
I'm thinking Tigris. I ask, "Where's the Euphrates?"
Nathan cocks his head, looks at me oddly
(how can an adult be asking such a thing?),
"It's in Mesopotamia."

Sure enough, there they are, the Tigris and the Euphrates,
blue paper flowing down the long table of Mesopotamia
and in the famous land between the rivers, five cities:
Ur, Erindu, Uruk, Assur, Harran, and Babylon,
a ziggurat at the center of every one. My docent
loves the ziggurats … 4 rooms each, and at the top
they pray or give food to the gods.

The sand you see is for the desert in Egypt.
As you know, the pyramids are found here.
This is our pyramid. And here's our mummy—
King Tut, the most famous one of all.
But my guides can't remember: is it crocodiles
or alligators in the Nile? I tell them from my grown-up
knowledge (trying to make up for the Tigris)
that beyond North America, alligators live only
in China. Nathan, arriving from Mesopotamia,
says, "Yes, in the Yangtze River."

As my tour ends, a new group of visitors arrives.
I stay, observe their travels, their leanings over
the Great Wall, the Himalayas, pyramids and ziggurats.
When the lights blink, it's time to move, and visitors are led
across continents and borders, civilization to civilization,
docents of the ancient pointing and explaining.

Now, in hiatus before the next tour, museum personnel
sit on the floor. Mrs. Baker reads aloud
books made by ninth graders especially for them –
Scooby Doo in China, Spongebob in India,
the Magic Schoolbus in Ancient Greece.

Anne McCrary Sullivan is a poet, naturalist, researcher, and teacher educator with the Florida Regional Campus of National-Louis University. Her poems and her articles relating poetry to teaching and research have appeared in many literary and academic journals including *The Gettysburg Review, Southern Review, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, and *Harvard Educational Review*. Her collection of poems, *Ecology II: Poems from The Everglades* is in press for January 2009.

Terms of Engagement: A Question of Synergy

Edwina Grossi, Embury Institute for Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on my Ph.D thesis, An ordinary teacher: An autoethnography, which is a teacher self-study where I revisit my experiences in the field of education. Through the use of stories I explore personal experiences to come to a deeper understanding of myself, and my practice, allowing others to reflect on theirs. The article discusses the meaning of lived experience and and the terms and synergies pertaining to student and teacher engagement.

ENGAGED?

They asked me why
I dropped out of school
No love, no caring
Known as a fool
They asked me why
Grades I could not attain
Was it really me to blame?

Did you see me
Did you care
Could I not have had a share
Sat on the outside
Cold on the inside
Engaged?
With whom and what and where?

(Grossi, 2007)

*V*ibert and Shields (2003, p. 237) argue for a "transformative pedagogy" concerning student engagement; Ellyard (1998, p. 64) refers to the development of a "new pedagogy" and Butler- Kisber and Portelli (2003, p. 2) contend that a critical perspective of engagement is needed to enhance social justice and academic excellence. So, how do we achieve this? How do we create a new, transformative, engagement pedagogy that ensures social justice and academic excellence? In my dissertation, *An ordinary teacher: An autoethnography*, themes concerning student and teacher engagement unfolded from the stories relating to my experience as teacher, principal, lecturer and entrepreneur. In this article I explore the following themes: i) *Boring balance; exhilarating engagement* ii) *Are we engaged?* iii) *Do I touch your heart*?; iv) *People skills versus emotional disengagement*; and v) *Engaging threads*. I use excerpts from my autoethnography to contextualize this discussion. It is my hope that these themes build upon each other to create a synergistic picture of student engagement.

In my career as educator, I have had the privilege of founding five different educational institutions. Drawing on this experience I suggest there is an analogy between good teaching practice, which will enhance engagement, social justice and academic excellence, and good business skills. My experiences have contributed to my self-actualization and resonate with hook's statement that "Engaged pedagogy means that teachers must be actively committed to the process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (1994, p. 15).

The idea behind engagement theory is that learners should be engaged in meaningful learning tasks during interaction with others (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 2007, p. 1). Tomlinson (2002, p. 9) suggests that engagement concerns establishing an environment which entices students to learn, and identifies five relevant criteria, namely affirmation (students feel accepted and cared for), contribution (each learner senses he/she is important enough to contribute and make a difference), purpose (each student considers that the work is interesting and significant), power (each student deems that the work will contribute to continued growth) and challenge (each student believes that although the work stretches him/her, it is not beyond his/her ability to be successful). Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff (2003, p. 3) suggest that student engagement is influenced by phenomenological, instructional, teacher, individual and school factors. More simply, Whitaker (2004) states "Touch the heart, then teach the child" (p. 120). My school motto, *Love Conquers All*, concurs with this. Two stories from my thesis support Whitaker's perspective and illustrate how when a child feels loved, accepted and cared for engagement is enhanced and a foundation is laid for academic excellence.

Karen's Story

> Karen, a motivated learner who thoroughly enjoyed learning to read and receiving new books, was forced to remain at home due to a bad case of chicken-pox. Knowing the effect of being 'behind' in reading would have on her, I visited her home daily after school, taking with me flash cards of new words I had made especially for her and the books in which they appeared. Being an enthusiastic learner, it did not take long for Karen to learn the new maths concepts as well.… I knew Karen would have returned to school very demotivated and quite 'lost' had I not spent this special time with her (Grossi, 2006, p. 71).

Melanie's Story

> Melanie had a genuine love for young children and was an eager student teacher. During a lecture on 'unconditional love for each pupil,' I demonstrated to each student the power of a hug. As I hugged the first student, Melanie, seated in the third row, blushed and asked to be excused. I sensed something was amiss but carried on hugging each student. When Melanie returned I was waiting for her. 'Please Mrs Grossi, don't hug me,' she said. 'Why, my darling?' I asked. 'Just don't. Please—I beg you—just don't,' she answered. 'Melanie, how will you be able to hug little children or their mothers if you can't hug me?' I asked. 'Mrs. Grossi you don't understand. My mother died when I was two. My father and stepmother have never hugged me or touched me in any way,' she said. 'Melanie, I love you,' I said, as I enfolded her stiff body in my arms. Slowly but surely her muscles began to relax as she sobbed and let go of her pain. We stood hugging and crying for what seemed like hours. There was not a dry eye in that room. From that day Melanie hugged me every morning and I was moved to tears as I observed little children running up to her for a hug. One day her eye caught mine as a little head lay nestled on her shoulder, comforted by her arms. As she lifted her head from his, our eyes met and the unspoken message seemed to be, 'Thank you for helping me release my power to love and be loved' (Grossi, 2006, p.139). Great educators understand that behaviours and beliefs are tied to emotion, and they understand the power of emotion to jump-start change (Whitaker, 2004, p. 121).

Boring Balance; Exhiliarating Engagement

Having been involved in many entrepreneurial projects and confronted many problems, it has been my experience that in times of challenge new approaches are required to resolve a chaotic situation. It was in these situations, when I had to be totally engaged with people and problems, that my biggest personal growth, socially, emotionally and academically, took place. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) speaks of flow theory, which happens when people are stretched to their limits to meet challenges (Shernoff et al., 2007, p. 5). The authors explain that flow happens when a person is deeply absorbed in a challenge and functions at her optimum capacity. The experience itself becomes the reward.

The business world demands a new language—a language which uses terms such as "networks," "alliances," "culture" and "shared values" (April, Macdonald & Vriesendorp, 2005, p. 25), and I argue that the same should apply to the teaching profession. Now, could I add chaos theory to the combination of the "new language" within the framework of Csikzentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory? As Galbraith (2004) suggests:

> The new science of chaos has alerted us to the butterfly effect, to the very considerable impact tiny fluctuations in a non-equilibrium system can have on its output (p. 3).

Out of chaos comes order, new ways of thinking and new growth as we engage with a challenge, seek advice from others and stretch ourselves to the limit. However, Galbraith (2004) advises that in order to be successful, the leader, or the teacher, needs to first address culture "…destroying old myths, stories, legends … and where appropriate creating new ones" (p.3). When a positive outcome emerges from the chaos, it results in feelings of camaraderie, exhilaration and maturity. Self-worth and respect for others are enhanced and one is spurred on to accept and conquer more challenges. Therefore, by looking at student engagement with new eyes, one realizes that balance is boring and does not allow for growth and engagement, whereas turbulence is "thrilling" and paves the way for optimum growth in all areas (April et al., 2005, p.19).

Could one therefore suggest that one way to create student engagement leading to social justice and academic excellence, as suggested by Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003, p. 2), would be to create a kind of "chaos," or disequilibrium? There is nothing like turbulence to "throw" people together and produce the greatest learning

and engagement with others. I have found the famous words of John Donne, "No man is an island," quite true.

Wheatley (1992, p. 199) believes that the movement towards participation, engagement and collaboration in the workplace is rooted in chaos theory. The greatest breakdown of barriers between people, whether teachers or students, occurs when they become interdependent. Maxwell (2004, p. 229) states that, "As long as … people experience consistent wins in areas they value, they develop synergy." Therefore, if it is our job as teachers to ensure engagement, growth, creativity, new approaches to problems, academic excellence and social justice, then we need to prepare for a sense of chaos. Am I saying the classroom must be in a turbulent state, that the lessons must be chaotic? Indeed not! In fact, creating turbulence as I am Defining it requires even more planning and foresight on the teacher's part.

Are We Engaged? Do I Touch Your Heart?

The following excerpt from my thesis, is a fictional discussion, the only fiction in the piece, with a Grade 8 class and is meant to demonstrate that learning in school should be an active, engaging, experiential process which is meaningful, challenging, individualized (by catering to different talents and social groups) and varied. It is my belief that a teacher has the power to encourage all learners to achieve and reach their full potential by treating them as if they are already on the path. Auto-ethnography enables the researcher to journey back in time to recollect lived past experiences which shaped her life and to share these with an audience (Eisner, 1997, p.259). What better way to share some of my experiences relating to engagement, than by presenting them in story form? According to Ellis, (2004, p.23) a story makes the theory come alive. The following story represents an aggregate of many experiences I have had with students, and how I have learned from them.

Treat a man as he appears to be and you make him worse. But treat a man as if he already were what he potentially could be, and you make him what he should be.

Von Goethe (1749-1832)

Fictional Discussion With a Grade 8 Class

"Boys and girls, I've explained the different ways people learn. We are all different—some are visual learners, others learn by hearing and yet others from experience and touch. We learn through our senses. Some people do things others find difficult and vice versa. Today I'm going to read this piece of writing to you twice. Jot down anything you want to—anything that comes to mind as I read. Remember you will all have different answers and no answer will be incorrect or of no benefit. Here we go.

G: (Mrs. Grossi) Sam, what did you get out of the piece?

S: (Sam) Mrs. Grossi I felt that if I were on the bus that you read about, I'd ask the driver to stop for me to take pictures of the beautiful fields of sunflowers, the olive vines and the setting sun.

G: What would you do with the pictures, Sam?

S: I think I would bring them to school to show everyone.

G: Sam, your art is so expressive ... would you consider painting the scene from your imagination?

S: Wow! I didn't think of that—I can already see it in my mind!

G: You know what I loved best? What actually framed the picture for me were the words 'the sun painting streaks of gold in the sky.'

Bo: (Boetie) Wow! Words are powerful!

Be: (Beth) Yes, because you use your imagination. Now you can see the picture.

G: Quite right, Beth. That's what we need to do when drawing, writing poetry or writing. Use the imagination and be descriptive so that the person reading your work can see the picture without having a photograph. Beth, you have a flair for words. Would you like to compose a verse using words like 'the sun,' 'streaks of gold,' 'the field of sunflowers' —something like that?

Be: Do you think I can do it, Miss?

G: Why not? I loved your last poem. I've framed it and put it in the staff room.

S: (Sipho) Mrs. Grossi, you said we learn through our senses. Do you know what I heard? I heard the people in the square—the young ones laughing and the old ones whispering proudly about their grandchildren to each other. I also heard the young children asking 'Ma, where's the Nutella? I'm hungry!' Do you know I even heard their Italian accent!

G: That's excellent! Could you use that 'sense' in story-writing?

R: (Reena) Absolutely! I'm also going to look up the Afrikaans words in the dictionary and use this scene in my Afrikaans essays as well.

S: Imagine me writing about Nutella in Zulu! (The class laughs. Sipho has such a good sense of humour. How relaxed they all seem, and so attentive. I can see they are engaged in this lesson.)

A: (Amara) I heard other things. I heard music and laughing.

G: Wonderful, Amara! So did I! Instead of writing in an essay 'the music was playing,' what could you now write? Do you remember how the author put it?

A: I'd write 'the music changed from a slow foxtrot to a tango.' That was what you read! I wrote it down.

G: This is incredible! What else?

H: (Heinrich) I've never heard of a 'tarantella.' Is it a dance? I'll look it up on the Internet.

G: Yes—in that way you'll extend your knowledge. I don't know anything about the tarantella myself. Please won't you let me read what you download? Better still, Heinrich, won't you tell us all what you've learned? Let me know when you're ready.

Ma: (Maria) I'd love to do Latin American dancing one day. I'm going to look up all the different kinds of dancing on the Internet as well.

G: Fantastic! I did a bit of dancing when I was younger and would love you to share with me and the class what you have learned, Maria. Class, do you notice what's coming out in this lesson? There is not one person in the world who knows everything—there's always more to learn! We all have talents and one talent isn't better than the other.

Y: (Yvonne) Miss, I felt a little sad that the group missed the celebration in the square.

D: That's why it's so important to check things. Don't rely on a travel agent telling you about a certain festival in Italy—look it up yourselves on the Internet. Always do your own research guys! However, Yvonne, having said that, we must realise that often things happen in life for a reason, don't dwell on what might have been—look at what is and rejoice. Maybe if they had been in time for the celebration party they would have missed the beautiful moment in the square!

Y: I think I'm going to do a study on this area in Italy and the different festivals.

G: Yvonne, I sense you would be outstanding in drama. How about organising a group to re-enact the scene for us?

Y: Cool!

Sab: (Sabrina:) All this talk of Italy makes me hungry miss! My mother is Italian and she makes the most wonderful food, especially lasagne. I could just taste the food as you were reading.

G: Do you know how to make lasagna, Sabrina?

Sab: Yes miss. I enjoy cooking.

G: Sabrina, would you like to demonstrate to us how lasagna is made on Thursday in our life skills lesson? Can you ask the secretary to make a copy of the recipe for each of us as well? I'd love to know how to make lasagna properly. Remember, you are going to have to double or treble the recipe so that we can all have a taste! It's okay if you want to bring your mom to help. And Sam, can you take the art lesson on Wednesday? In the beginning just read the piece to the class again to refresh their memories, and maybe give a few suggestions as to colour and form. Give a choice of medium.

L: (Lieben) Well, I'm going to write a story. I want to be an author when I'm big so I'll begin with the story I already have in my mind from your reading.

G: Well done Liebs! Can you bring chapter by chapter to read to the class as you complete it? How exciting for us to be involved in a novel from the beginning. It will be a wonderful addition to our library. Imagine— you'll be the first pupil to have a book in the school library! And Liebs, will you take the creative writing lesson on Friday?

Th: (Thembe) Can I do the same as Lieben?

G: Of course! We need different inputs because no two writers write the same way and you'll bring a completely different version to the class. Now we'll have two books from this class. Wonderful!

Ti: (Timothy) Mrs. Grossi, the music also got to me! I just love music. I'd like to research different musical instruments.

G: A fantastic idea! Who'd like to do this project with Timothy? It's quite a big one. Edrich, I know you play the French horn. Won't you play for us the next music lesson? I am fascinated by this instrument.

Na: (Natasha) Timothy, I have a few instruments at home. Let's do a display table together. Maybe Edrich can add his horn to the table.

Ja: (James) Can I paint the background? I'll do a frieze of the different musical instruments!

F: (Faria) Can I help? I play the piano, you know.

G: I'd love to be able to play the piano one day! You need to give us a treat Faria. We have a piano in the hall.

Mi: (Mickey) Well I play the guitar....

G: Mickey, I didn't know you could play a guitar!

Mi: Yes, Miss.

G: Mickey, would you play for us in our next music lesson?

Mi: With pleasure, Miss. Do you know I sing as well? We have this little band …

Mrs. Grossi surveys her class. How wonderful they are, and how exciting teaching is! How happy and motivated they all seem. There is Mickey who is experiencing a barrier to learning but plays the guitar and sings, to everyone's amazement! How proud he was when the children said 'No way! Do you really play! Cool!' Right, Mrs. Grossi thought. 'Mickey, you are going to love reading—I'm going to find as many books on guitars as I can.'

G: Girls and boys, form yourself into groups; those interested in music with Mickey, those wanting to paint with Sam, those wanting to write verse with Beth, those wishing to write stories with Lieben and Thembe, those wanting to be involved in drama with Yvonne and those doing research with Heinrich.

Jo: (John) Miss….

G: Yes, John.

Jo: My cousin in Grade 10 is going to drop out of school and the family is, like, upset because he's not like, thick and all that, you know what I mean?

G: Why on earth does he not want to finish his schooling?

Jo: He says school sucks. He says learning is boring and monotonous. The teacher always shouts at him—like he makes mistakes, and he hasn't got time to do his homework properly because he has to look after and help his mom who's very ill, and things like that. Miss, I wish he could come to our school. Learning is such fun—we know we will make mistakes but it's part of learning. The way we learn is meaningful. We understand it. I mean I, we, you, the whole class is always involved in each other's learning. We help you—we teach you, you teach us—we learn from one another and we learn by researching ourselves. It's cool!

L: Yes Miss, he's right. I find learning incredibly exciting. One day I want to be a teacher, too.

B: (Bradley)Ja, then when you're old you could write a book on it! Hey! Didn't you say you want to be an author? How can you be a teacher and an author?

L: Why can't I write about the different ways I teach and the effects on the children? Or maybe I'll write about my life in the teaching profession.

G: Lieben, that's called an autoethnography.

L: A what?

G: An autoethnography. It's about your life in a particular field. You know, I think every teacher should write an autoethnography. We all have so much to learn from one another.

G: Tamie, why are you so quiet today?

T: (Tamie:) Miss, I've heard some bad news. Can we talk at break?

G: I'll be waiting for you."

(Grossi, 2006, pp. 158-169)

Good business practices correlate with education (Galbraith, 2007, p. 2). What is needed first and foremost for success in any area is vision. Vision is akin to a "mind photograph" and links mission and action. However, vision, according to April et al. (2005, p. 19), " …animates, inspires, transforms us only if it is deeply rooted in our human needs and values. And the essential need and value is love."

I learned that the key to all teaching is: You must love your students with a deep self-giving love.

Russell (2007, p.1)

According to April et al. (2005), love is demonstrated in organizations in three ways: love for ourselves, love for others and love for what we do. The author explains further that, "… good management is largely a matter of love, because proper management involves caring for people, not manipulating them" (p. 19). Jaworski is of the opinion that the capacity for love creates a "field" surrounding a person that "transcends individual and selfish needs." Are schools not organizations? Are we hoping to create social justice and academic excellence? Then we need to learn to love others, ourselves and our work. There can be no greater satisfaction than when we do what we love and love what we do. Passion, enthusiasm and commitment are the outcomes of the love of a profession. I believe that these three elements are the key to the "how" a person teaches, and "how" a person teaches is a powerful factor in student engagement.

And all knowledge is vain save where there is love: And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931)

In romantic terms people who are in love usually want to get engaged, they are not manipulated into doing so. The word "engage" is defined in the Oxford Dictionary (Soanes, Spooner & Hawker 2001, p. 292), as when we "enter into a contract to do," "enter into combat with" and "interlock," amongst others. Bearing this in mind, the word "engage," when used in the context of teaching, speaks to me of the contract teachers and learners enter into, a contract that binds them together as they enter into relationship, and a contract which will require learner and teacher to interlock with one another to achieve common goals. However, as in a marriage contract, this requires unconditional love and acceptance, otherwise the contract would become null and void as there would be no demonstrations of emotions, no going the extra mile, and so forth. Furthermore, learners construct their own knowledge as they engage with the world. Therefore, the primary function of the teacher is to create a warm, challenging, learning environment that will not only foster this kind of learning , but will also assist students in learning socially accepted behaviour which, in turn, lessens classroom conflicts. This is accomplished as the teacher recognizes the need for continuous student affirmation as she caters for the different learning styles, multiple intelligences, various talents and the diverse personalities of the learners in her class (Dryden & Vos, 2005, p. 353). This in itself may seem the epitome of chaos theory to some, but allows for incredible student/task, student/teacher, student/peer engagement.

The word education is derived from the Latin word *educare* which means to "draw out the unique qualities of the whole person" (Dryden and Vos, 2005, p. 143). The process should also allow for learners to make decisions concerning the planning, implementing, reporting and assessing of the work (Russell, Ainley & Frydenberg, 2007, p. 13). Zyngier (2004, p. 10), speaking of critical-transformative engagement (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 237), states that "All students should be able to see themselves as represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist between different social groups." April et al. (2005, p. 87) advise that the new South African business leadership has become conscious of the multiple realities that exist in diverse groups and cultures. Similarly, in the classroom situation, in order for teachers to engage fully with each learner, they need to recognize and value that learners' perspectives differ according to their life experiences.

People Skills Versus Emotional Disengagement

Individuals with excellent people skills connect with us easily, make us feel good about ourselves, and lift us to a higher level. Our interaction with them creates a positive experience. (Maxwell, 2004, p. xiii)

The following co-constructed story from my autoethnography demonstrates emotional disengagement and "re-engagement." Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003, p. 3) ask, "Why does the serious involvement of students enhance their engagement, and in what ways?" They also ask "How does the pathologizing of students that do not fall within the mainstream distract us from a more complete understanding of disengagement? What conception of engagement is consistent with an inclusive curriculum?" Perhaps the story of Nicholas, a handsome twelve-year-old child with cerebral palsy who refused to attend school, can help provide an answer.

Nicholas was not only frustrated with the fact that he had to travel miles to attend a "special school," unlike his younger brother who attended school within walking distance from their home, but also found school boring and "nonsensical." His biggest Goliath was reading. However, his greatest disappointment was that, unlike his brother, he would never be able to be involved in cricket, the sport he so dearly loved. Therefore, he decided at the age of twelve to simply drop out of school. We had never met so I invited Nicholas to tea one Saturday. This is what transpired.

E: (Edwina) Nicholas, I have a school, a place where learning is such fun that children are upset when it is holiday time. I would love you to be part of it.

Ni: (Nicholas) No, because you are going to make me read.

E: Me? Make you read? Oh no—I don't make children do anything. Children must enjoy learning.

Ni: Well, what will I do?

E: I know you love cricket. We'll follow the South African Cricket team on the map as they play all over the world. We'll look at pictures in the cricket magazines and your teacher will read cricket magazines and the newspapers to you and your friends. There is a television in one of the rooms and you will be responsible for informing the school of the score.

Ni: You promise?

E: I'll only promise if you will allow me to show you my school today. There are a couple of empty classrooms so, if you like the school, you

can choose your classroom. Here is a cricket magazine I bought you. Inside is an excellent colour poster of the South African cricket team that we'll pin on the wall before we leave.

Ni: Is the school far? I want to go to my brother's school—it's just near where we live.

E: Take my watch. I will drive from your house to your brother's school. Let's see which one is the closest. You will be surprised!

Ni: Will you let me play cricket like my brother?

E: And why not?

Ni: Because they say I'm different. I have cerebral palsy, but there's nothing wrong with my brain. I'm very good at math but my eyes hurt when I read.

E: We're all different in some way. Don't you think it would be a boring world if we were all the same? I'm not very good at math and you are. You don't like reading and I do. I don't know how to follow cricket and you do.

Ni: I remember all the cricket scores from every game.

E: So your memory is excellent!

Ni: So, why can't I go to my brother's school?

E: Because God kept you for my school. He heard when I asked Him to choose children for me. If you were at your brother's school I would never have met you—that would be very sad for me.

Ni: My brother's school sucks! " (Grossi, 2006, p. 165)

The day I cried in front of the class was the day Nicholas read me a verse he had written. He informed me of his newly found insatiable love of reading. He was completing more than three books a week! How he loved being on the cricket team! How important he felt as he donned his cricket gear in preparation for a match.

According to Maxwell (2004, p. xiv), "People skills make the difference between those who excel and those who don't" in the teaching profession. Hopkins (2005, p. 1) suggests there are eight essential people skills, which Coan (2005, p. 1) likens to emotional intelligence. These are: the ability to understand people; the ability to express thoughts and feelings in a clear manner; the ability to voice concerns when needs are not being met; the ability to ask for, and give, feedback; the ability to influence others' thoughts and actions in a positive manner; the ability to deal with and resolve conflict; the ability to delegate, share and work as a team member and the ability to "walk away" from unproductive relationships.

"Servant Leadership" is referred to in business as a "more holistic approach to work" (April et al., 2005, p. 99). The authors suggest we interpret the word "servant" to be a "nurturer of the human spirit," or an "inspirer." Syque (2007, p. 1) suggests there are two criteria for assessing servant leadership. The first is that the people served develop as individuals and become servant-like themselves. The second is the "extent to which the leadership benefits those who are least advantaged in society." Is a teacher a servant leader? Is disengagement in some instances the result of the human spirit not being nurtured or inspired as it should be? Could teachers become a channel for social justice?

Russell et al. (2007, p. 6) see emotional disengagement as "learned helplessness." Many learners attribute repeated failure to some inadequacy within and may simply "give up," believing that they can do nothing to change themselves or the situation in which they find themselves. All learners need challenging but attainable, meaningful tasks that allow them to build on prior knowledge and their interests. Furthermore, Brewster and Fager (2000, p. 5) advocate that educators should build on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation "to engage students more fully in school." This can extend from verbal praise to trophies. However, as in the case of Nicholas, the classroom climate needs to respect individual differences and support social-constructivist learning.

Research tells us that the teachers who are most successful in engaging students develop activities with students' basic psychological and intellectual needs in mind.

(Brewster & Fager, 2000, p. 7)

Engaging Threads

There can be no engagement without a partnership. Traditional hierarchical principles of leadership in business are yielding to those of teamwork, involvement, community and behavior that occurs in an ethical and caring manner (April et al., 2005, p. 99). In the same m,teachers and learners can create a positive climate for social collaboration. Russell et al. (2007, p) state that:

A supportive, friendly, safe classroom, that emphasises positive emotions and interactions, contributes to students' social-emotional wellbeing, resilience, productive coping strategies and engagement in learning" (p. 14).

The following excerpt from my autoethnography demonstrates that learners will enjoy engaging with tasks they themselves find challenging, interesting and important, without even being asked to do so.

> While the school was being built, pupils were shown the plans and witnessed, among other things, borer-eaten wood being replaced, and the original tiled floor being unearthed under layers of carpet and linoleum. How wonderful it is for children to learn from experience! They enjoyed feeling the borer-eaten wood and seeing how windows are replaced, and many other incidents offered visual learning experiences. One little boy was so fascinated that, of his own accord, he did a study on borers. This proved to me once again that if a person is interested in a topic, he/she does not need to be coaxed to learn about it. What a wonderful way to teach English, Mathematics, History, and Biology, or any other subject! While searching for information and writing about borer, this child was improving his English, learning methods of research and, although young, was learning Biology! We made full use of the construction experience—Numeracy had never been more fun as we measured and estimated many things to 'help' Uncle Mickey (my husband), for example, how many pieces of new wood he would have to order, as well as the size and number of windows needed. Mathematics came alive for my Grade 1 and 2 pupils as they experienced the value of this learning area. A copy of the plans was displayed in each classroom and the boys, especially, took great delight in informing me of the progress of the building. I took equal delight in pretending to rely on their calculations regarding the time of completion of certain tasks, and the number of items that still needed to be ordered (e.g., bricks, fascia boards and tiles). The pupils were fascinated by the installation of the toilets, basins and electricity. Many declared their newfound profession for their future lives. Learning should always be meaning-based, exciting and relevant to the learner (Grossi, 2006, p. 158).

Conclusion

In the last decade, research has equated student engagement with academic success (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 1). If teachers believe in complete engagement with their students and the learning material, as well as democracy, social justice and academic excellence, then they need to rethink and perhaps reframe the concept of

teacher to that of leader, and draw a parallel between the new landscape of business skills and the teaching profession.

I would suggest that an autoethnography is a powerful tool for engagement for both writer and reader. It brings about motivation, change and self-understanding in the writer and the reader. I transfers valuable learning material to in-service and pre-service teachers, for exploring other ways of teaching, and encourages teachers to become totally engaged with their learners and to speak out beyond the educational system. All of these dimensions were clearly evident in the results of my research. Although in the past decade there has been a growing interest in the use of the life story to facilitate teacher development (Muchmore, 2002, p. 1), it was as early as 1926 when Lindeman (p. 9) saw the value of personal, lived experience in learning and coined the phrase a "living textbook" (p. 9). This article has allowed me to open my living textbook and share some of the stories which I hope may contribute to and further the discussion on student engagement.

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Edwina Grossi, qualified in 1965 as a Foundation Phase specialist teacher in South Africa. In her career as teacher, principal, lecturer and entrepreneur, she founded Wonderland Pre-School, Wonderland Baby Care, Embury College Private Primary School, Embury College High School, Train-a Child Pre-School Teacher Training College, and is co-founder of Embury Institute for Teacher Education which, inter-alia, offers courses to in-service teachers, and training across a broad spectrum of fields.

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"Engaged <u>to</u> the Teacher"

Louise Jarrett, Trafalgar School for Girls

ABSTRACT

A high school teacher surveys her students about what engages them in the class-room. She discovers that her students are authorities on engagement and that her ideas about how to engage students do, for the most part, correspond with theirs. It seems that the relationship between teacher and student is at the heart of student engagement.

*T*he problem with teachers is that they think they know everything. At least, they think they know everything about their subject and about their students. When I first considered the subject of student engagement for this article I sat down and began with a list of all the things I thought contributed to it. The list was long—it covered two sheets of legal-sized paper—and it was not until I had finished it that I had a moment of hesitation. As I reviewed my list, I realized that I had just broken my first rule as a teacher: start by asking my students what they know about a topic. I developed this rule early on in my teaching career when I figured out that the teacher, as an expert, is a rather daunting figure.

It is very empowering for students, as they embark on the study of a new text or topic, to discover that they already know something about it. Students need to feel that they are not "empty vessels," but rather, expandable ones that hold both considerable and valuable knowledge. It is not only possible, but also desirable, to make the themes of a piece of literature or the socio-cultural contexts of a work meaningful and interesting by beginning with a brainstorming session. Simply asking students, "What do you know about...?" can elicit a wealth of information. Of course,

some of the information will be inaccurate, maybe even false, and there will invariably be misconceptions, biases and even prejudices expressed during this initial discussion. There is no need to address or correct these at this stage. Students will eventually adjust their ideas as their knowledge develops. Often students will correct each other and offer different ideas. What is important here is that the information, including the misinformation, be generated by students. It is discouraging for students to always be confronted with what they do <u>not</u> know. The world of adult knowledge must often seem like a very exclusive club to which they will never gain membership.

As I gazed at my list of what I thought I knew about student engagement, I wondered why I had not simply asked my students what engages them. They endure five 65-minute periods a day, five days a week. I teach a maximum of three 65-minute periods a day and so they presumably have more expertise on student engagement than I do. I set aside my list. I filed it away and took a new approach. I recollected a class on qualitative research methods that I had taken many years ago. Being an over-extended teacher, I did not revisit my textbooks and class notes, or investigate the literature on the teacher student relationship, as perhaps I should have.

Context

I have taught at a small private girls' school in downtown Montreal for the last 14 years. I have had the privilege of working with small classes of motivated, self-disciplined students. Although it is an independent school, it has a very diverse population and this is one of its strengths. Our students come from a wide range of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Since my school offers more bursaries per capita than other independent schools, we are able to maintain a very heterogeneous population, thereby avoiding the elitism often associated with private schools.

I teach grade 10 and 11 English Language Arts and also two separate North American Literature classes, an option at the senior level. I came to teaching indirectly and almost accidentally. After graduating with a B.A. in English from Trinity College, the University of Toronto, I signed up for two years with Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO). I taught from 1980–1982 in a remote secondary school in northern Nigeria—a posting with no electricity and no running water. Upon returning to Canada, I attended McGill and gained a Diploma in Education. From 1984–1986, I taught grades 5 and 6 in Salluit—the northernmost Inuit community in Quebec.

After a seven-year "sabbatical," during which time I raised two children, I returned to teaching in 1993 at the school where I am currently the Head of the English Department. I have completed all the courses for a Masters in Education, but the final step, a special activity/thesis, is proving to be elusive. My goal for some time has been to take a year off and complete my graduate degree. I hate unfinished business. I love being a student, but I must love being a teacher more because each year I return to my job rather than to my studies.

Approach

I began my thinking about this topic by reviewing the process I had employed for a research paper on teachers' attitudes towards professional development. I decided to survey my students and use their ideas on student engagement as a basis for my article. I did not create a questionnaire because I wanted to see how students would respond, in their own words, to the topic. I considered the definition of engagement employed by Vibert and Shields (2003) in their article, "Approaches to student engagement: Does ideology matter?". According to this article student engagement is …

> a continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches to those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic worldview. We would suggest that not only is this a descriptive continuum, but that a move from the rational, through the interpretivist, to a more critical understanding, also approaches a more socially grounded construction of engagement (p. 237)

I read it over many times and decided that I could not offer this definition to my students. It only served to remind me of the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practices. If I did not find the definition helpful, then how less helpful would it be to my students? I came up with my own simplified definition and used it on a survey sheet. At the top of the page was the heading Student Engagement followed by a single paragraph:

> When a student is engaged he or she is interested and involved in what is happening in the classroom. Whatever the task is, whether reading, writing, listening, discussing or watching, the student's attention is focused and he or she is willing to participate.

Beneath this paragraph was written:

I feel engaged in the classroom when…

At the beginning of class I explained that I was writing an article and would appreciate my students' help. I gave out the sheet, read the definition of student engagement out loud, and allowed 10 minutes for students to write whatever they wanted. Students were instructed <u>not</u> to put their names on the sheets. Interestingly, my students were very engaged in this exercise. There was no talking, unusual in an all-girl's class, and everyone was "on task." Much to my surprise, students were writing at length, filling not only one side of the sheet, but also, the reverse side. No one seemed stuck for ideas and, surprisingly, there were few questions. The questions asked were straightforward: "Can we write in point form?"; "Are we talking about English class only or any subject?"; and, "Can we give examples?" At the end of 10 minutes, I collected the survey sheets. Some students were not finished and asked if they could give in their papers later on in the day. All of the students who kept their sheets did, in fact, hand them in later, sometimes days later. I did this activity in my four separate classes.

Altogether there were 47 respondents, not a large sample, but, approximately, one quarter of the population in my small school. As senior high school students, these girls have considerable classroom experience and presumably have insight into what engages them. Collectively, they had spent at least 470 academic years in the classroom. If I allow for a minimum of 5 hours a day, 5 days a week for 9 months of the year, that figure represents 900 classroom hours per student each year. Therefore, my sample of students had 423,000 hours of classroom experience. If I compared their classroom experience to my own, it became obvious that they had an advantage. I estimated that over the course of 18 years I had taught an average of 15 periods a week for 36 weeks of the year. My classroom experience only totalled 9,720 hours.

Discussion

Having collected my survey sheets, I set about collating the information. I identified 59 separate items and wrote each item on an index card and then placed similar or identical references under the headings. Then I began to categorize these references according to key words. Throughout the process, my goal was to keep

things simple. My key words were: Who, What, When, Where and How. My findings were what emerged from a simple, local "experiment" that I found to be both interesting and informative.

Under the "Who Engages" category, I placed all references to the teacher and to the student. What surprised and pleased me was the fact that an equal number of items addressed the teacher and the student as factors in student engagement in the classroom. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the items discussed the role of the teacher and exactly the same percentage discussed the role of the student. The balance in references to both the teacher and the student seemed almost too good to be true. I reviewed the surveys again highlighting the word "teacher" with one colour and the word "student" with another. Out of 59 items "teacher" and "student" each occurred 16 times. Clearly teaching is a partnership between the teacher and the student.

On the subject of the teacher, I found that my students had plenty to say. In fact, I took the title of my article from one student's comments. She wrote:

First of all, teachers <u>have</u> to be charismatic [underlining not added]. It is fundamental, I think, that the person from whom I am supposed to learn something is someone with whom I can feel connected. I think feeling engaged in a classroom has something to do with feeling engaged to the teacher [underlining added].

This sentence stood out for me and I was immediately struck by the misuse of the preposition "to". The preposition "with" would be more appropriate here and yet the student's use of "to" was not simply a grammatical error. This student's survey was filled with thoughtful and well-written prose. As I read her statement over and over I realized that, whether consciously or subconsciously, she had identified a key element in student engagement, what I call the teaching relationship. Being engaged "to" someone, rather than engaged "with" someone, has a very different connotation. I hope I will not be misunderstood when I suggest that a partnership between the teacher and each student definitely exists. Many respondents spoke of the importance of the relationship between student and teacher. Seventeen percent (17%) of the students mentioned the necessity of liking and/or respecting the teacher as a prerequisite to being engaged. Ten percent (10%) of the students stated that the teacher needs to be "charismatic" in order for them to be engaged in the classroom. The need for the teacher to "show leadership," "to be confident," and "not be afraid of her students", was mentioned by 12% of the respondents. Similarly, 12% of the students surveyed felt it was important that the teacher be "animated." Eight percent

(8%) of the students expressed the belief that teachers need to "talk to the students" rather than just talk. Six percent (6%) of the students felt that it was essential that teachers "treat students as equals", and not to be "biased" or prejudiced" towards either the material or the students. Another 6%, felt that teachers needed to "share their own opinions and views" and "be honest" with their students. Four percent (4%) felt that the teacher best engaged them if he or she was "relaxed," "not too strict" and was "fun". By far the most significant item was the idea that a teacher needed to be "enthusiastic," "passionate," and "dynamic"—23% of respondents felt that these characteristics played a role in their level of engagement in class.

Students' comments were quite eloquent. For example, one student wrote, "I feel engaged in the classroom when the teacher is passionate when she/he teaches. This encourages me to like what they teach me. It inspires me." Another student wrote, "I feel engaged in the classroom when the teacher is genuinely interested and excited about the subject. Their enthusiasm is often transmitted to the students. I feel that that makes the biggest difference in the way I feel about a class." Another student referred specifically to one teacher saying, "Ms --- gets so into it, and she teaches history like some sort of fantastic story. I am invested in the story and am utterly captivated."

Students' comments about the teacher were very detailed and filled with words like: "charismatic," "dynamic," "entertaining," "involved," "confident," "honest," "open," "humorous," "enthusiastic," "passionate," "animated," "energetic," and "interesting." The students' sentiments can best be summarized by the following statement: "It's not the subject that engages me. I could be sitting in the most boring class (subject) in the world but be totally into it because the teacher makes it worthwhile."

Students proved to be equally insightful about their own role in classroom learning. I identified all "I" statements as being a reflection upon the student and distinct from all statements beginning with the words "the teacher". Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents mentioned "being sleep-deprived," "being tired," and "not having enough sleep" as impacting negatively on their engagement in class. One student's comment sums up what was a refrain running through the survey responses, "When I am tired I find it VERY hard to stay engaged" [capital letters not added]. Another factor affecting engagement negatively was being hungry. Nine percent (9%) of the respondents commented on how hunger distracted them in class and that the 3rd period, the one before lunch, was identified as being a problematic one for many students. On a positive note, the same percentage of the students, 9%, reported being more engaged when their own experience was called upon and

when they were "having a good time" in class. Six percent (6%) of the students felt more engaged if they felt they could "be open with a teacher" or "give an opinion freely". Four percent (4%) felt engaged if they were "creating something" and also when they "understood the material". Other issues mentioned by 2% of the students were: being required to analyze, having a role to play, being able to problem-solve "without the teacher", and being given a choice about activities. Two percent (2%) of the respondents also mentioned that they were more engaged when, "not preoccupied with problems," "when comfortable with my peers," and also, "when my peers are engaged too". What struck me about the students' comments about themselves was how well attuned they are to their own needs. Sadly, many of the factors affecting student engagement are not within their control.

In the category I labelled "What Engages Students" there were significantly higher percentages. Thirty percent (30%) of the students said that they were engaged when "I can relate personally to what is being taught". One student wrote, "When I can relate personally to the topic being learned it gives me more of a connection and makes me more motivated to work." Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the respondents felt that they were more fully engaged when the material was "interesting", "relevant", "captivating", "controversial" or "intriguing." Eleven percent (11%) of the students noted increased engagement if the material being taught was related/connected to current events or to contemporary culture. One student wrote, "I feel engaged in the classroom when the information we are learning is connected to real life and we get to make the connections." Another student appreciated her teacher, "relating the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to today's hip-hop culture." Nine percent (9%) of the respondents felt more engaged when the material being taught was new and not a review of previously taught subject matter. Two percent (2%) of students felt their engagement increased when they perceived the material to be "essential to my future." One student wrote, "I feel engaged in the classroom when I feel that I am learning something that is useful in life."

When learning occurs also proved important since 19% of the students commented on the time of the day. Classes at the beginning of the day were problematic for the majority of students. They expressed a preference for classes later in the day when they felt more engaged because of feeling, "fully awake," "more alert," and "not so tired". Two percent (2%) of the students felt that their engagement in a specific class depended on what class came either before or after that class. Two percent (2%) noted that if there was a test later on that day they would not be engaged in the classes that preceded it.

Where learning takes place also affects student engagement. Thirteen percent (13%) of the students surveyed were influenced, either positively or negatively, by the atmosphere in the classroom. If the classroom was "bright", "not too busy", and "relaxed in atmosphere", they felt better able to engage. Class size also mattered and 2% of the students felt more engaged in smaller classes. As one student wrote, "A smaller class means students are closer and the atmosphere is welcoming; students are more likely to not feel as nervous about participating in class."

Ultimately, the question of how students are taught proved to be the most compelling category as 29% of the 59 items addressed this issue. Once again students demonstrated considerable insight into the learning process. Well over half of the students surveyed, that is, 66%, reported being most engaged in classroom discussions or debates. One student said, "I feel engaged in the classroom when there is a class discussion I can understand and participate in. I would rather have an interesting class discussion than listen to a lecture or watch a movie." Another student said, "I feel engaged in the classroom when we have class discussions that involve everyone interacting, where there is an exchange of ideas." This same student recalled an activity called "Survivo" which we did as an introduction to *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954) in early September. She had a vivid recollection of animated small group and class discussions about priorities in the event of a plane crash during a class trip. One rather philosophical student said, "When we have class discussions it's possible to hear your thoughts." Second only to discussion, was a preference for some audio-visual component to the class. Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents mentioned the desirability of images and/or sound accompanying a lesson. Movies were popular; however, photographs, video clips, posters and, even, overheads transparencies apparently contribute to student engagement. Humour rated very highly with students—17% identified it as something that really engaged them. Students also favoured working in teams or small groups—11% felt this engaged them more. What students called "Getting personal" was also favoured, 9% saying that they engaged more when either the teacher or their peers shared personal stories and anecdotes. Similarly, 9% of students were engaged when the teacher read aloud to them as opposed to only 6% being engaged when the class was involved in silent reading. Only 6% of respondents reported being engaged if a specific task, such as note taking or calculations, was assigned. Other factors students referred to under the heading of how they were taught included: the teacher demonstrating/modelling something; the teacher using /her voice effectively; being given clear explanations of difficult material; using contemporary examples; allowing a hands–on approach; letting students "teach the class"; and maintaining a lively pace. All of these dimensions enable students to engage more readily.

Having spent a great deal of time considering my students' responses, I was rather reluctant to return to my own list of what engages students. What if I had gotten it all wrong? I was impressed with what all my students had to say—their observations seemed astute. I read over my list with a critical eye and concluded that, while I needed to revise it and add some things, I was, at least, on the right track. I offer my original, unrevised list simply to demonstrate that what teachers know intuitively about teaching often conforms to what students intuitively know about learning.

I engage students in the classroom by:

- having a relationship with them based on unconditional regard
- being passionate about my subject
- valuing their own knowledge and experiences
- connecting literature to real life
- using humour
- making literature relevant and showing how it teaches us about the human experience
- interpreting difficult texts and concepts and teaching students the vocabulary and skills they need
- reading aloud to students
- honouring their writing
- sharing my own writing with my students
- listening to their ideas
- reading the books they recommend to me
- suggesting books they should read
- using various media in the classroom
- introducing them to the author of a text as someone they might like to meet
- being sensitive to the mood in the class and being flexible
- letting people vent in class
- praising their engagement with a text or project
- allowing students choices

- having high expectations and assuming that students are smart enough to "get it" or "do it"

- being honest

- being human

Student engagement requires teacher engagement. If the student is engaged to the teacher it follows that the teacher is also engaged to the student. It's a relationship, and as such, deserves commitment and our best self.

Implications

At a pedagogical morning at the close of the school year, I gave an informal presentation of my "mini study" to my colleagues. They expressed surprise and pleasure at the discovery that the teacher student relationship is so pivotal. Many teachers said that this had always been their understanding, but that to verbalize it had seemed egotistical. My sense, from the feedback I received, was that my fellow teachers value their relationship with their students and get the most reward from this aspect of their profession. If teachers do not usually talk about student engagement in such personal terms, it is probably because they feel that those outside the classroom may not understand the connections that are made within the classroom. We are currently in the midst of implementing educational reform in Quebec. The Quebec Education Plan (2007) is an ambitious plan that "integrates all the subjects into a coherent whole focused on the major issues of contemporary life" (p. 5). Teachers are expected to "develop skills that will enable (students) to become educated and cultivated individuals, involved citizens and competent workers" (p. 4). The curriculum stresses competencies, but also a cultural approach which ensures that "all students have access to a broad culture and "a critical, ethical and aesthetic view of the world" (p.6). The word community is used repeatedly in the Quebec Education Plan (QEP) and schools "must act as agents of social cohesion by helping students learn how to live together and by fostering a feeling of belonging to a community" (p. 5). However, schools and classrooms represent communities and cultures within the greater community. I believe this greater community, the society in which schools exist, needs to engage in more learning about what actually happens in those places to which it sends its young people from Monday to Friday. There is surprisingly little curiosity about schools outside academia. Surely, "What did you do in school today?" should never be an idle question.

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Autonomy Building Through Peer Tutoring: Second Language Students Engage in Literacy Learning

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that direct instruction of literacy skills benefits all learners, especially second language learners and students with learning challenges; however, students become disengaged when skills are taught through repetitive drill and skill practice in isolation from meaningful contexts. This article examines the critical pedagogy of an elementary classroom teacher as she engaged students in a peer tutoring reading program that developed learners' autonomy and self-esteem.

In recent years there has been a move away from whole language teaching and a return to basic skills instruction due to lowered achievement scores on standardized tests (Freppon & Dahl, 1998). The No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States has resulted in mandatory literacy skills instruction for ninety minutes daily in many schools (Love & Fiedler, 2005). Teaching skills in this manner is a disturbing trend since it isolates skills instruction and sets it apart from a meaningful context within which learners can situate their learning (Street, 1984; Twiss, 1996). Research indicates that direct instruction of literacy skills benefits all learners, especially second language learners and students with learning disabilities (Huie & Yahya, 2000); however, students become disengaged when faced with repetitive drill and skill practice. This article will describe a peer tutoring program that Cathy (a pseudonym), a grade 2/3 teacher from a school in Southern Quebec, used to promote the engagement of second-language learners as they

learned to read. By personalizing her curriculum and pedagogy, embedding skills instruction within a meaningful context, initiating a teaching/learning cycle through peer tutoring, and responding to individual needs, Cathy supported her students in becoming self-regulated literacy learners.

Situating the Study

My qualitative inquiry of Cathy's literacy practices took place over the course of one school year as part of my doctorate. The photograph below depicts Jean Marc (a pseudonym) reading a book to his first-grade peer tutoring partner as part of an adapted literacy program designed by Cathy to meet special needs of individual learners. I will describe this and other literacy practices throughout this article in an attempt to clarify ways in which Cathy successfully engaged students in their literacy development.

Fig.1: Peer tutoring program

Pleasant View Elementary School (a pseudonym for the school in the study) is a vibrant school situated in a thriving city in Southern Quebec with over five hundred students and thirty teaching staff. The school offers an English education to a mainly French-speaking student population. A Language Arts consultant from the school board recommended Cathy as an outstanding teacher who was well known for her exceptional teaching practice.

Nineteen of the twenty children in Cathy's class spoke English as a second language. French was the first language of all but one of the nineteen students, although a number of parents spoke both French and English. Over 90% of the class began kindergarten as unilingual francophone students; however, by the time they reached second grade they communicated well in English. Students in both grades began the year below grade level in reading and writing and all eight children in third grade followed Individual Education Plans (IEP) to support their special learning needs.

I made twenty-five visits to observe Cathy's classroom during the two-hour Language Arts period in the morning from January to June and part way through the study I selected six children to study in greater depth than the rest of the class. These children seemed to emerge gradually as ones that drew my attention. I chose four children who had the greatest learning difficulties. I thought that their literacy behaviors might reveal facets of the literacy program that would otherwise remain hidden with students who were able to read and write more easily. Jean Marc, Marie and Sylvie (pseudonyms) were third grade students who faced learning challenges and needed the support of a teacher aide for at least half an hour a day, four days a week. They had difficulty processing language and were unable to decode or encode print. Robert, also a third grade student, had a hearing impairment that required Cathy and the other children to use a microphone that amplified the sound through his headphones. I also chose Philippe and Charlotte, second grade students. Charlotte was a bright girl who read, wrote and spoke quite well in English, while Philippe had begun the year in great frustration and felt unable to express his ideas in English either orally or in writing. The first language of five of the children was French and I felt they represented typical challenges faced by the majority of students in Cathy's class.

Methodology

For my inquiry, I decided to create a case study using grounded theory, a form of analysis that elicits themes from the data, narrative analysis that builds contextualized stories from the data, and visual ethnography (see below) as complementary research approaches. A case study is "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Visual ethnography (Harper, 2003; Prosser, 2007) is a particular approach that utilizes photographs, film and other digital media environments to learn more about people and

their world (Goldman-Segall, 1998). Visual images and technologies were both the method of exploring and the means of representing ethnographic knowledge (Pink, 2001). As participant observer, I collected data by photographing, video- and audio-taping, and interviewing both Cathy and her students. I often stood at the back of the room to videotape but also circulated in the class to observe students' behaviors more closely. I used these images in conjunction with transcriptions of interviews, instructions and student dialogue during my analysis and in representing my findings.

Defining Engagement

Before describing the peer tutoring program, I shall explain my conception of engagement. Engagement is focused attention and perseverant commitment to learn that includes a sense of pleasure and enjoyment in the "doing" (Newmann, as cited in Vibert & Shields, 2003; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004). It includes intrinsic motivation in the sense that engaging in a task is initiated by an inner desire to learn, understand, or accomplish some intention and consequently results in the ability to sustain interest and active involvement in an activity (McMahon, 2003). Engaged behavior is demonstrated by an eagerness to enter into a task and a quickness to settle into a concentrated effort to think critically and reflectively about the activity. Because the task is of personal interest and relevance, the individual is unwilling to abandon the task easily; on the contrary, an engaged learner will invest extra time and energy to persevere even when faced with obstacles and frustration.

Fig. 2: Sustained interest and active involvement

I think it is important at this point to situate engagement within a broader conceptual framework. The above definition could be applied within any of the three paradigms outlined by Vibert and Shields (2003), a technical/rational, interpretist or critical perspective. The technical/rational conception is an approach to teaching and learning that maintains teacher autonomy in the transmission of a mandated curriculum; an interpretist perspective is more student-centered in that students are offered more opportunities to make choices within the classroom curriculum. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, questions issues of power and voice with the goal of raising awareness of democratic rights of all learners regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or ability. This latter framework invokes a form of critical reflection that accepts honest discussion of sensitive issues and offers a forum for agentative transformation of society. Offering equal access and opportunities for all learners from differing backgrounds and abilities in a safe, caring environment is necessary for a just, democratic and empathetic education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, as cited in Vibert & Shields, 2003).

Critical pedagogy is particularly relevant to this study because it "challenges social structures and exposes inequities and inconsistencies between stated intentions and realized commitments of existing social institutions such as schools" (McMahon, 2003, p. 262). The Quebec Education Program (2001) advocates "success for all"; however, many children in today's schools face learning challenges that are further exacerbated by being English language learners. Students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia "need carefully constructed, individual instructional programs" that will enable them to fully participate in and beyond classroom life (Hehir, 2007, p.14). Unfortunately, some teachers are insufficiently prepared to address the diversity of emotional, academic and behavioral needs of these learners. Furthermore, teachers holding a deficit notion of students with learning challenges (Pardoe, 2000) lower expectations and children, stigmatized by being labeled disabled, lose confidence and self-esteem (Harry & Klingner, 2007). They gradually become disinterested in participating in a curriculum that offers only "token gestures toward inclusivity" (McMahon, 2003, p. 263). Teachers need to develop not only effective literacy strategies but also a critical stance in moral and ethical concerns in literacy instruction especially in addressing the needs of minority cultures and at-risk student populations (Harris & Graham, 1994; Leland, Harste, Jackson, & Youssef, 2001).

Peer tutoring has improved both academic achievement and behavior in students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Barton-Arwood, Wehby, & Falk, 2005; Kreuger, 1996; Kreuger & Braun, 1998, Kreuger & Townshend, 1997). Peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) for English language learners with learning disabilities have resulted in substantial improvement in reading comprehension (Saénz, Fuchs, &

Fuchs, 2005). This study provides a description of a peer tutoring program that embeds skills and strategy instruction within meaningful, functional reading and writing experiences, an approach that has proven to be an effective, balanced method of teaching literacy skills (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999).

Personalizing Curriculum and Pedagogy

Teachers need to get in touch with their educational philosophies in order to live out their personal values and beliefs in the classroom with integrity. Doing so creates a sense of harmony and balance in their interactions with students and in the way they choose to interpret and enact their curriculum. Cathy believed that "children are by nature smart, energetic, curious and eager to learn…. They learn best when they are happy, active, involved and interested in what they are doing" (Holt, as cited in Morgan & Saxton, 1994, p. 18). She admitted that "these kids are sweet, good, hard-working and generous" and her sincere affection for them was evident in the way she tousled Jean Marc's hair, or gently placed her arm around a child's shoulder.

Cathy didn't want "to be the authority all the time" and stated, "My ultimate goal for these children is that they become independent." Her perception of children reflected a basic tenet of self-determination theory—that people are "curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best they are agentic and inspired. They strive to learn, extend themselves, master new skills, and apply their talents responsibly" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). All of these attributes are reflective of individuals who are fully engaged in learning, and research has shown that teachers who support student autonomy foster a learning environment that nurtures student engagement.

Cathy lived out the notion that knowledge is emergent, developmental and partial, (Bruner, 1996; Fosnot, 2005; von Glaserfld, 2005; Schwandt, 2003) and this "radical idealistic perspectivism" (Good & Brophy, 2003) allowed her to operate from a place of rest. This resting place created a relaxed, pleasurable atmosphere in the classroom where children could learn within social communities of discourse without having to endure the tension of unrealistic expectations that exist when a teacher puts a mandated curriculum before learners. Cathy said, "Children drive the learning" and recalled an incident in which she had attempted to correct every example in an assignment. "It was excruciatingly dull and boring. I was bored. And you could see their eyes just rolling too." As a result, she allowed students to correct work in partners and discuss answers rather than dictate answers ad nauseam.

Realizing that understanding and competency develop slowly over time, Cathy planned engaging literacy events such as the peer tutoring program that challenged learners to acquire reading skills within the authentic context of teaching younger students how to read. Through the peer tutoring program, children learned to function independently with their tutees.

Developing Literacy Skills
Through Books and Buddies

Cathy taught literacy skills through a peer tutoring program called Books and Buddies (Kreuger & Braun, 1998). This reading program was developed by two of Cathy's colleagues in an attempt to help the francophone population learn to speak and understand English as they learned how to read. It is a highly structured program in which children are partnered in a one-on-one interaction, reading to each other and engaging in cognitively challenging literacy activities that enhance reading skills.

Fig. 3: Partners actively engaged in sequencing activity

Research supports the use of peer tutoring as an effective strategy for teaching reading skills (Barton-Arwood, Wehby, & Falk, 2005; Kreuger & Braun, 1998). The main objective of the program is to increase and improve reading fluency among second language learners. According to Kreuger & Braun (1998), it aims to:

- Provide each child with the opportunity to read and practice English for 30 minutes a day

- Provide an atmosphere where children would find reading pleasurable and thereby come to love to read

- Train the children in appropriate reading behavior and reading strategies through mini-workshops so that the peer-tutoring time would be effective

- Develop positive social skills, recognizing that children learn best when they feel good about themselves and see themselves as successful

- Improve the children's spelling skills

- Introduce the children to different genres of texts

- Improve the children's writing (p. 410)

Kreuger and Braun's research (1996, 1998) and my study (Kingsley, 2007) indicate very positive results in attaining all of these objectives.

Cathy's students worked with first grade children. In November, Cathy and the first grade teacher, Norma, met together to plan the peer tutoring program for the year. The collaborating teachers prepared an agenda, a two-sided, six-page booklet outlining the sequence of activities for a four-day period. They carefully partnered the children according to their abilities and needs and maintained these dyads for approximately three months at which time they changed partners taking into consideration compatibility of both personalities and reading skills. The dyads were divided into two groups, meeting in one of the teacher's classrooms for thirty minutes a day, four days each week. In March, Cathy's class helped to train the first grade children to become big buddies with the kindergarten class by practicing the kindergarten agenda with the first grade students.

Preparation for Books and Buddies

Cathy prepared her class for the first visit by having students generate a list of interview questions to get to know their buddy. Both teachers demonstrated how

to give supportive feedback and friendly greetings. Part of developing self-regulated behaviors included organizing reading materials each day. The children were responsible for checking that they had their agenda, reading books, white boards, markers, and activity sheets.

Phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling were all components of Cathy's literacy program. To crack the alphabetic code of the English language, children need to learn about phonemes (sounds), graphemes (letters), and graphophonemic (letter-sound) relationships. Tompkins (2006) explains that children

> …learn graphophonemic relationships as they match letters and letter combinations to sounds, blend sounds to form words, and decode and spell vowel patterns…. [S]tudents actually develop three separate but related abilities about the alphabetic code:
>
> *Phonemic awareness.* The ability to notice and manipulate the sounds of oral language. Children who are phonemically aware understand that spoken words are made up of sounds, and they can segment and blend sounds in spoken words.
>
> *Phonics.* The ability to convert letters into sounds and blend them to recognize words. Children who have learned phonics understand that there are predictable sound-symbol correspondences in English, and they can use decoding strategies to figure out unfamiliar written words.
>
> *Spelling.* The ability to segment spoken words into sounds and convert the sounds into letters to spell words. Children who have learned to spell conventionally understand English sound-symbol correspondences and spelling patterns, and they can use spelling strategies to spell unfamiliar words. (p. 115)

Developing all three abilities is essential for an effective literacy program for young children (National Reading Panel, as cited in Tompkins) and Cathy incorporated these elements into her literacy instruction. The graphophonemic awareness program offered children opportunities to identify and categorize sounds in words through a number of different games over the course of the week. One type was a memory game in which the child had to discover matching pairs of words from sound families. A second board game required the younger child to write only the first and last sound of a word on a small dry-erase (white) board as it was dictated by the older

partner. Cathy also taught her class how to sort words into sound families by cutting and gluing words into their notebooks (Bear and Templeton, 1998). They then led their buddies in a similar activity.
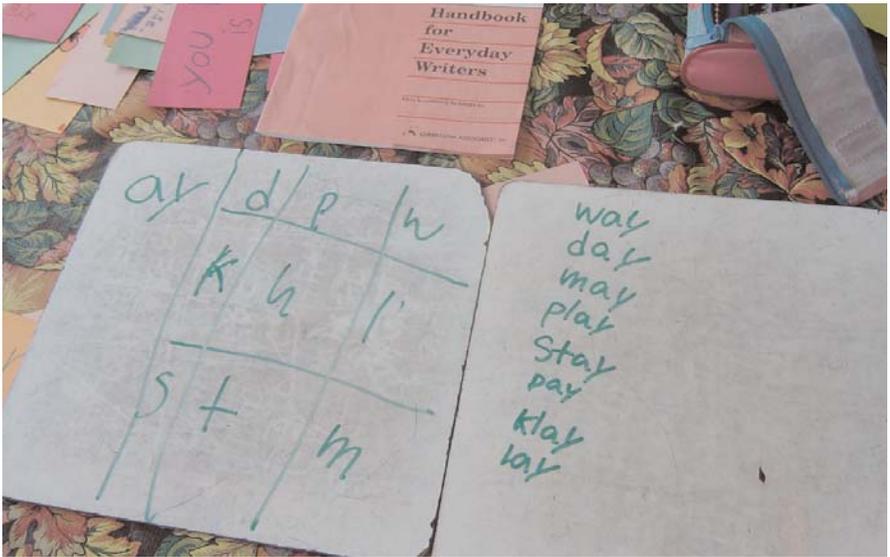

Fig. 4: Graphophonemic activity

Because these skill-building activities were designed in a game format, the children found them engaging and fun.

Teaching/Learning Cycle

These elements were taught through a dynamic *teaching/learning cycle*. This term refers to the way in which Cathy initiated a cyclical process of teaching and learning that included students and their peer tutoring partners. Second and third grade students were given opportunities to learn particular skills and subsequently teach these skills to their peer tutoring buddies. Often Cathy began by instructing the entire class and then moved the learning process to small groups or individuals working to practice the concept or skill. After a short time period the class regrouped as a whole to share what they had learned and Cathy provided feedback on their learning. There was a constant flow between teacher-directed whole class instruction to small group or individual teaching/learning interactions and then back to whole class wrap-up sessions.

Cathy's teaching methods maximized student engagement. She generally used an inductive, indirect approach for whole-class instruction calling on individuals to provide information to co-construct knowledge together (Wells, 1999, 2000); however, when preparing children for Books and Buddies she often used direct teaching and modeling to ensure students understood how to proceed with their buddies. The inductive approach precluded a passive response by students since they were required to draw upon their prior knowledge to answer probing questions. Modeling evoked an active involvement on the part of the children as they role-played their little buddies' responses.

An example of Cathy's indirect approach occurred when she reviewed long vowel sounds. Instead of telling the class what a long vowel sound is, Cathy asked the students to define the term. Richard defined the term but was unable to provide a correct example. Cathy redirected his understanding through questioning strategies:

C: Just get your white boards and your markers and we're going to do something for about fifteen minutes before we prepare for buddies. You are going to work to find as many words as you can. And remember, I'm thinking of long vowel sounds. Of course, you can make any words. But, try and focus on the long vowel sounds. Can anybody tell me what may make the long vowel? Richard?

R: It says its name.

C: It says its name. Yes. What would it look like in a word?

R: Like *apple*. A says its name.

C: Say that word again?

R: Apple.

C: What letter says its name?

R: The *A*.

C: So, are you sure that's a good example? Because, you would have to say *Aepple*. What about the word, Richard? What about just this word? (Cathy wrote the word *ape* on the white board) Is that a long vowel? Is the *A*, a long vowel there or a short vowel? Just listen, everybody. In the word, APE. Is it a long *A* sound?

Once Cathy clarified the children's understanding of long vowel sounds, she asked them to list as many words as they could and check them in the dictionary. She then circulated and monitored students' progress during their collaborative interactions. Students' focused dialogue drew them into the learning process as they explored possible answers. Checking their dictionaries prior to the final large-group

discussions further sustained their interest in the activity since they were curious to determine the accuracy of their initial attempts to find correct examples. The whole class session at the end of the activity provided Cathy an opportunity to clarify and correct misconceptions that she had noticed as she observed students' work so that students felt self-assured when they tutored their learning partners.

The chart below indicates the cognitive challenge of this type of activity when the children had to generate their own examples of silent e words using the letters on the chart.
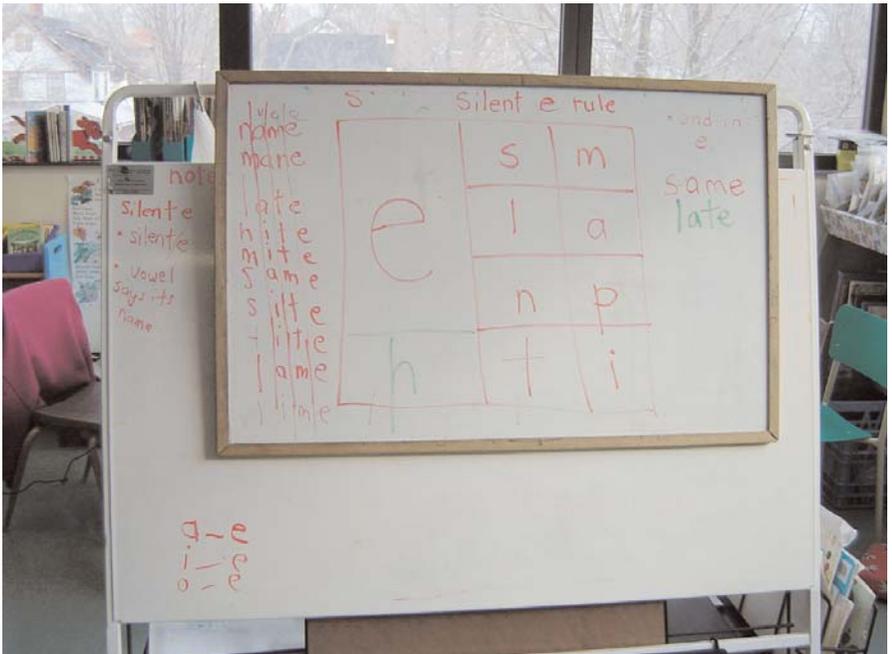
Fig. 5: Concentrated effort required for cognitive challenge

The children valued this teaching/learning cycle as it gave them the authority to be little teachers. This was especially the case during peer tutoring. Both Cathy and Norma prepared the children well for the day's exchange. Just prior to the buddies' arrival in class, they reviewed the agenda, modeled how to teach the particular literacy skills for the day, and gave students time to practice. The partners felt confident in their teaching and from the many classes I observed performed their role effectively.

To illustrate this aspect of the teaching/learning cycle, I shall provide a glimpse of an interaction between two students, Rachel, a second grade child, and Alice, a first grade student, as well as the preparation Cathy gave Rachel prior to Alice joining her. Cathy began by explaining to the class that they had a new phonemic awareness sheet to work on during Books and Buddies. She asked the children to read the instruction sheet with her together as a class and then individually:

C: This is going to be for this week. What you can do with your grade 1 buddy. …we'll use this one. Look at the first one that says number 1. Put your finger on it please so I can see … Make *R* … Read it with me please.

C/St: Make *R*, say car. Make *car*, say *far*. Make *far*, say *bar*. Make *bar*, say *star*.

C: Read that yourself one more time. Go back and read it to yourself silently.
(THE CHILDREN READ THIS OUT LOUD AGAIN ALL TOGETHER)

C: Okay, let's go where it says number 3. Please put your finger on it so I know everybody is reading the same thing. Because it's tricky. We've changed your phonemic awareness a little bit now. Say *MUST* without the *T*. So, do it yourself please. Say *MUST* without the T. The next one. Okay, I'm the big buddy, you're the little buddies. So, you have to answer, okay. Hey, little buddies. Say *SLEEP* without the P.

St: SLEE.

C: Say *FLAG* without the G.

St: FLA.

C: FLA. That's it … good. Okay. That's what you're going to do with them today.

The excerpt from the transcript illustrates the careful planning Cathy did to prepare the children for the peer tutoring program as she explained the activity and demonstrated how to enact the new phonological skills.

When Rachel and Alice, her first grade partner, began this activity shortly after Cathy prepared the class, Rachel was an effective teacher for her partner. Since the activity was new for Alice, she had difficulty grasping the instruction to drop the final sound in the word. Rachel corrected her mistakes and helped Alice understand how to identify the changed ending sound:

R: Okay. Say *SLEEP*.

A: SLEEP.

R: Without the *P*.

A: EEP, LEEP.

R: SLEE.

A: SLEE.

R: Okay. Say *FLAG*.

A: FLAG.

R: Without the *G*.

A: FLAG.

R: No. It's, because I said to you to take out the *G*. So, you say *FLA* not *AG*, okay?

A: FLA.

I found this teaching exchange insightful as it demonstrated that children can effectively teach their peers in a self-regulated manner when they have structured support (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004). Cathy's instructions were clear, detailed and informative. Students received explicit instructions and demonstration of expected teaching strategies prior to the tutoring, agendas that listed the sequence of activities, and phonemic awareness sheets that outlined the words to be used for the lesson. This brief episode illustrates the power of the teaching/learning cycle in maximizing the engagement of students in literacy learning since they were intrinsically motivated to attend to instructions in order to perform their teacher roles with their learning partners.

Positive Emotional Quality of Engaged Students

One sign of engagement is the "emotional quality of a person's active involvement in a task" (Reeve et al., 2004, p. 147). Although some of the students in Cathy's class began the year experiencing great frustration due to their inability to read or write at level, their negative attitudes towards literacy changed into ones of pleasure and positive self-esteem as they learned how to read and spell.

Phonics abilities were strengthened through a procedure in which younger buddies dictated their power words (most frequently used words) to the big buddies who wrote them on small white boards. The first grade students were taught to meticulously check the spelling by making a check mark above each written letter. The children were very focused as they engaged in this spelling activity and the photographs below illustrate the enjoyment they had while doing their work.

Fig. 6: Active, enjoyable involvement in checking spelling

Cathy taught her class reading strategies such as predicting, using illustrations, skipping the word and reading ahead, and finding smaller words within bigger words. Her students also learned other reading strategies such as retelling stories, sequencing illustrations, and answering comprehension questions. All of these reading skills were taught within the context of the peer tutoring program and the children valued their importance since they realized that they would be teaching these strategies to their buddies. Consequently, they were positively energized to acquire reading skills and delighted in assuming personal responsibility for tutoring their partner (Reeve et al., 2004).

Early in the year, the big buddies read a book several times to the little buddies and taught their partners how to point to words as they were reading. By the end of the week, the younger children were able to read the book by themselves. From January to June, both members of the dyad self-selected a book to read to their partner. Both Cathy and Norma strongly believed in the importance of allowing the

children to make their own choice of books in order to maintain their autonomy in the reading process and also to foster a love of reading. They taught their students how to choose books at their independent reading level and it was inspiring to see the concentration and interest of the children as they pored over books in the class library.

Fig. 7: Personal interest in reading

Building relationships was an important part of the Books and Buddies program. Cathy made a point of welcoming the younger buddies when they entered her classroom and kept a watchful eye on the interactions between the dyads, noting any inappropriate behaviors. The pleasure with which the children engaged in these literacy activities was evident in their expressions and body language. Smiling faces and bodies leaning toward each other were captured on film, but images do not adequately convey the hum of children's enjoyment as they learned together. I was constantly amazed with the children's focused attention and on-task behavior. They usually knew what to do and moved from one item to the next on their agenda. Cathy circulated to ensure they were on track; however, few needed to be redirected.

Fig. 8: Pleasure in learning

Role of the Teacher

The teacher's role in Book and Buddies was an essential component in making the program function efficiently and successfully. Collaboration with her colleague in the organization and structure of the program, preparation of materials, selection of pairs and scheduling the timetable was an important first step to getting the peer tutoring up and running for the year. Besides explaining procedures and modeling reading and teaching strategies, each teacher had to provide time for children to select and practice reading independent reading level texts. The teacher's responsibility was to observe and evaluate reading and social behaviors of individuals, dyads and the class as a whole, adapting and adjusting the program to accommodate students' needs. Providing individual and whole class feedback encouraged positive behaviors and afforded opportunities for children to address difficulties through joint problem-solving discussions. Each teacher supported children in dealing with inappropriate behavior by intervening when necessary. Ensuring that students understood their roles was a further responsibility of the teacher.

Role of the Students

Students began by learning how to select and replace books in the classroom library. They learned a variety of reading strategies and practiced these strategies during in-class activities and home reading. Organizing materials, choosing an appropriate place to work and reviewing their agenda preceded teaching literacy skills to their partner. Other responsibilities included encouraging their buddy by providing positive feedback, keeping their partner focused, and addressing off-task behavior by independent problem solving. Writing story maps (summaries) of books they read with their partner was part of their role as a tutor and enabled Cathy to track their reading. Cathy taught and modeled each step in the peer tutoring program to ensure that every child knew how to proceed.

Adaptation of the Program

As part of her role in Books and Buddies, Cathy designed an adapted program to address the needs of children with learning challenges. She used a series of books about a large red dog named Clifford to support the development of children's literacy. These learners were unable to decode words using conventional strategies; instead, their strength lay in a holistic approach of memorizing a series of frequently used words to build a sight vocabulary. Children learned to identify these sight words through repetitive interactive games and activities followed by reading the designated words in the Clifford books. Cathy's students were given a booklet containing word cards and activities such as Bingo and Concentration along with a corresponding Clifford book. Cathy and Patricia, the teacher aide, trained them how to use the program and gave them opportunities to practice the vocabulary with more advanced peers from the class.

Fig. 9: Cathy explaining adapted program to Jean Marc and peer

Cathy's role in designing and implementing this "Clifford" remedial program required considerable time and effort on her part. She prepared materials, trained both the students and her teaching aide, observed the tutors carefully and offered corrective guidance as they enacted the revised program with their buddy. The Dolch list, a list of 220 high frequency words, provided an assurance of the appropriate level of challenge for both sets of learners. Extending inclusive opportunities such as the adapted peer tutoring program engaged special needs students by enabling them to fully participate in the academic program of the classroom (Giangreco, 2007).

Effect of Adapted Program on a Child
With Special Needs

This adaptation to the peer tutoring program had a significant impact on children with learning challenges, especially on Jean Marc, a child who faced severe obstacles in learning to read and write. Jean Marc was a gentle, kind boy who was patient, responsible, and respectful. His eyes often reflected the complex challenges he faced as he struggled to read and write and he sometimes looked perplexed or

exasperated by the overwhelming task of processing instructions. His learning dis-abilities were further complicated by the fact that French was his first language and he had no exposure to English books in his home.

Reading presented a tremendous challenge for Jean Marc. In September, an analysis of his reading skills indicated that he was unable to decode or encode words. During the first half of the year, Jean Marc would get frustrated with reading and would give up easily, but, with the new remedial program designed by Cathy, he was more motivated to persevere since he was able to draw on his strength of memoriza-tion rather than his weak decoding skills. Jean Marc initially worked on the literacy activities with a partner from third grade and subsequently presented these to Stephan, his learning partner in the peer tutoring program. Jean Marc stated that the "Clifford" program helped him "learn how to say words" and added that his second- and third-grade partners helped him as well.

Fig. 10: Interactive Bingo required concentrated effort

He recognized that his friends helped to prepare him to use the remedial reading program more effectively with his little buddy than he could have done on his own by giving him the opportunity to practice what he had been taught by Patricia and Cathy.

The peer tutoring program had a significant effect on Jean Marc's percep-tion of himself and contributed to his confident self-image as a learner and a person. In this safe learning environment (Hawkins, 2007), his reading began to improve and

he indicated that "reading starts to be easy." He knew that he had a positive impact on another child and felt empowered by his teacher role. Jean Marc thought his grade one buddy, Stephan, liked him and knew he had helped him because "he can read longer books now." The first grade teacher admitted that the grade 2/3 children played an important role by helping her students remain more focused through one-on-one attention, especially in this partnership that involved a troubled child who normally had difficulty concentrating.

This bright, kind-hearted child attained the goals of his Individual Educational Plan (IEP) and completed the year having learned some effective reading and writing strategies that he would be able to build on the following year. More importantly, Jean Marc left Cathy's class intact, a whole person who was wonderfully confident and saw himself as intelligent and able to help others.

Conclusion

This peer tutoring program improved academic achievement and behavior in students from both first and second/third grade classes by maximizing their engagement in literacy learning. Reading fluency and comprehension increased as students learned reading strategies and practiced reading at home and school. Of the eleven children in second grade, seven scored above level, three at level and only one experienced difficulty according to the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores from June. All of the children in third grade achieved the goals set out in their Individual Educational Plans and two of these students attained a DRA reading score of "at level."

The children loved choosing and reading books for pleasure and their roles as little teachers motivated them to be attentive, active learners. Their self-esteem rose as they learned positive social skills by providing appropriate feedback and addressing behavioral problems with their buddies. Through observation and individual interviews with six focus students, I could see that all students, including those with special needs, saw themselves as self-confident, effective readers and writers. For the most part, children were focused, on-task, and had a serious attitude toward this literacy event. I was inspired by their professional comportment and respectful attitude toward their partners and yet they maintained a playful sense of enjoyment as they interacted with their buddies.

Implications

Rather than teaching literacy skills through repetitive drill and skill practice, teachers can balance their literacy program by embedding direct skill instruction within authentic contexts that challenge students to learn skills in meaningful situations that demand their use. Peer tutoring programs, when adapted to meet individual needs, can offer a form of critical pedagogy that not only *engage* all learners but, more importantly, provide a democratic form of education in which students with diverse ability levels can build on their strengths to develop competency. Jean Marc's summary of Cathy's belief in him is a poignant reminder of the impact she had on her students: "She says, 'Now I teach you everything. You may do it.'" A teacher's conviction that all children can learn, when combined with supportive, responsive instruction, can empower students to become autonomous learners as they assume leadership roles in organizing and directing literacy events in a self-regulated manner.

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Engaging Students: The Power of the Personal

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ABSTRACT

Good teaching occurs when students can be themselves, can learn through application and collaboration, and can enjoy the excitement of discovery. That being the case, teachers today must compete with a society where students experience gratification and entertainment at the flick of a switch. The Internet and related technologies have changed the way that children learn and our understanding of the learning process. To address these changes, new teachers are entering schools with tools, expertise, and expectations that differ dramatically from past generations of pedagogues. Yet, in spite of the newly emerging views on learning, student engagement remains essential. The article shows that making curriculum personal for all learners is a basic premise of engagement.

We, the authors of this article, are two school principals returning to the university classroom to do what we love best: to teach. As members of the International Learning Community (a partnership between McGill University, school administrators and school districts in several countries), we were given the opportunity to witness both commonalities and differences in schools in England, in the United States and in neighboring Canadian provinces. The visits had afforded us with insights into how children learn and how they adapt to different classroom environments and widely contrasting curricula. As well-experienced educators, we have witnessed change in society and the impact this change has on the youth committed to our care. Many students reflect the effects of a fragmented family, non-conformist life attitudes, and abbreviated childhoods. As principals, we worked with teachers who were challenged to provide relevant learning experiences

that prepare students for life in a complex world where knowledge changes exponentially. We were confident that, by using the strategies we had known instinctively throughout our careers in education, we could succeed in engaging students at every level. However, we acknowledged that our students might be motivated in different ways from those we had taught years ago. We found ourselves asking: What would be required to engage the learner of today?

When students are engaged in their learning, the magic of discovery is tangible, visible, shared and motivational, even for the observer. Engagement is a rapport: a space in which conversation occurs. It propels teachers to think about who they are and what they are doing. It asks them to reflect upon the following questions: Is our way of being enthusiastic, clear, passionate, and open? Are we providing situations for students that invite them in: elements of trust, relevance, and choice? Do we stimulate curiosity and build on strength?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to engagement as, "… a connection between something inside and an opportunity outside to …produce something real" (in Scherer, 2002, p. 7). Almost, all natural learning is constructivist, it seeks to find personal meaning in response to the world. Therefore, instruction must relate to what the student finds important to learn.

The Quebec Education Program is based on the tenet that learners construct their knowledge and their own world-view. Critical reflection, actions and reactions must be part of the learning process. The school curriculum can exercise a "decisive influence on the way students choose to construct, alter and develop their world view" (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001, p. 6).

The Web site *Wordreference.com* defines engagement as "human action; human activity; participation, involvement, involution and commitment: a dedication to bringing about change through the action of enfolding something; embracing and creating new knowledge through action, thereby constructing meaning." What a definition for engaging classroom teaching!

Lessons that Enfold: Embracing and Creating New Knowledge

The issue of engagement is of paramount importance in our university classroom work. For the last 2 years, since leaving as principals of elementary schools of our own and having had 3 decades of involvement in classrooms, we have been teaching undergraduate and graduate level courses in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. We plan the lessons for our student teachers by taking into consideration their needs as well as our own. To engage them would certainly mean integrating technology into the sessions. We realize that we are sharing learning with students who are accustomed to working cooperatively and who are well versed in using laptop computers in the classroom and accessing information for assignments downloaded from the Internet. But it also means returning to the philosophy of experts such as William Glasser (personal communication, 1986) who asks educators to build a good "LAFF" into each lesson, that is, love (belonging), achievement, freedom and fun. In a similar vein, Richard Sagor (1993) coins an acronym he refers to as "CBUPO": the need to feel competent, to belong, and to feel useful, potent and optimistic.

In keeping with these thoughts, we aim to provide students in both our under-graduate and graduate classrooms with the opportunity to work cooperatively, to build the social structure of community, and, as much as possible, to have freedom of choice. To achieve this goal, we are prepared to respond to their efforts with words of praise and encouragement: "We care. You are valuable to us. Your learning is important." We know we need to create lessons that answer their questions, recognizing that through connecting to what they care about we can be engaging them in their learning.

Some students in our Assessment and Evaluation course, an undergraduate course in the Bachelor of Education Program, arrived with an urgent inquiry: How will I know that my students have learned? We were confronted in that question with the first requirement of engagement: connecting the curriculum to the great existential issue of success and failure (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2001). To find the answer, we asked them to reflect on a skill they could do well, and to tell us why they knew they were good at it. Their answers ranged from "I know how to do it" (ability); "I am passionate about it" (engagement); "I am always learning to do it better," (evolution); to "Others ask me to show them, or I can teach someone about it" (transfer of knowledge). Through this inquiry process, we developed a rubric that students could use to evaluate their own learning as well as the learning of others.

Some students in our Language Arts class, another course that is part of the Bachelor of Education Program, also arrived with an urgent inquiry: How do I teach children to read and to write? Our task was to find a way for *our* students to understand how *their* students would master these skills. We drew them in with two questions: What do readers do? What do writers need? These questions generated inventories that the students created and led the class into conversations about literacy by modeling what both readers and writers do. We created the space for them to become readers and writers themselves. They wrote their thoughts and reflections in their journals. Questions led to more questions. They pursued probable answers. They were motivated to create lessons based on real-life questions they might pose for their students, and perhaps more importantly, as well as those that their students might ask.

Freedom and creativity, we learned, are essential to engagement. To further their knowledge and make it practical and meaningful, students were asked to imagine the ideal Language Arts classroom. In this assignment, they were required to demonstrate how to provide a balanced literacy program in an enriched environment. The detailed models and drawings they presented were proof that they were well on their way to thinking like teachers! They began to feel competent and ready to experience a classroom setting. We witnessed in them a growing enthusiasm and anticipation about implementing their ideas, beliefs and practices in real, live classrooms.

Lessons From the Field: The Doing

Our theories seemed to be working. How would they apply what they were learning in the field? Would our students take what we had modeled and taught into the classroom? We suggest that the following anecdotes about two of our student teachers affirm our position. (All student names in this article are pseudonyms.)

Stephanie

Stephanie, a fourth year student teacher, welcomed us with a smile into her grade five inner-city classroom. We entered her student-teaching classroom now in the role of supervisors. She was relaxed and excited as she was nervous about the lesson she had prepared. She told us that she had intervened in a fistfight on the previous day, and that one young man was suspended. With a twinkle in her eye she added, "This is quite a group! But I am enjoying them and am learning a lot." At that

moment, the children, like a herd of elephants, ran up the stairs and into the class-room. They were out of breath after racing against each other from the playground. Stephanie stood quietly by her desk with a rain stick in her hand. A rain stick is a musi-cal instrument, a hollow cactus stem filled with tiny pebbles. Stephanie had learned that upending the rain stick produced a sound reminiscent of falling rain. She held it up and the students grew quiet as she let it speak its gentle message. She had asked her students to tell her how she should ask for quiet, and they had chosen her rain stick. It was their choice, and they respected its meaning.

Stephanie's lesson involved reading an excerpt from a story she knew would catch their attention. *The Face on the Milk Carton* (Cooney, 1996) is a compelling story of a young girl, Janie, who discovers her own face, many years younger, on a milk-carton message about a missing child. What should she do? Who should she tell? Was it really her face on the carton? Was her family *really* her family?

Stephanie's skillful reading, her timing of pauses, and her energy behind the words built a feeling of suspense that was gripping. Stephanie stopped reading and asked the students to assume the role of someone who could help the girl in the story. She suggested to the students that they could ask her questions or give her advice as she played the role of the young girl. The rain stick was to be used as the signal to move into a character role, and out of it again. We found ourselves wonder-ing breathlessly if these students could handle this challenge. Speaking from their seats in this tightly crowded classroom, some assumed accents and became guid-ance counselors, teachers, police investigators and friends of the girl. Their questions and comments were astounding, showing a real understanding of the dilemma at hand. It was like watching a magical performance. We lost track of our supervisory role and entered the world of the narrative drama.

Later we reflected on this hour-long lesson and realized we were watching a young teacher who had the natural instincts to make learning fun and inclusive. Her rapport with her class indicated mutual respect and caring. The students were free to choose their roles and to respond to a teacher who included them in classroom management decisions. When students are invited to make choices about real and relevant topics in an environment of trust, encouragement and discovery, they learn.

Nicole

The students were chatting and moving into their desks when we slipped into the classroom to observe, Nicole, a third-year student teacher. These sixth graders

had been trapped indoors during a rainy-day lunch period. "I had the strangest thing happen yesterday when I arrived home from school," Nicole began in a matter-of-fact way. She had the students' attention in no time. They wanted to hear what she was saying. "I found this letter waiting for me." Nicole held up the envelope. The students sensed a mystery and wanted to hear every word. You could hear a pin drop. They craned their necks in anticipation. The young teacher had her students in the palm of her hand. They were "hooked." The lesson was underway.

The letter, we discovered later, had been written in the voice of one of the characters from the novel, *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) a story about a boy named Stanley Yelnats who chooses camp over jail for his sentence for a crime he did not commit. The students knew exactly who had written to their teacher from the clues in the letter. A discussion followed about the characteristics that made each individual in the story unique. The students were asked whether or not they had ever tried to stand in someone else's shoes. They reminded the teacher of their recent debate about the three little pigs versus the wolf. The class had held a court case with judge, lawyers, and jury. They had already learned much about empathy. They were challenged to work in groups to write a letter in the voice of one of the characters from the novel they were reading together.

Seven in the class of twenty-seven students had significant learning challenges, but not one was disengaged. Nicole is a teacher who models courtesy and sensitivity. Her students respect and appreciate her because she cares about each one. Her creativity and her caring are rewarded when all her students are passionately engaged.

During this particular session, Nicole demonstrated a willingness to give time to students who required personal assistance. Her lesson accommodated a diversity of expression and range of abilities. Group work enabled each student to use her or his individual skills and strengths.

Lessons From our Graduate Students: The Being

Our third group of students, who were participating in a graduate program in Educational Leadership at McGill, arrived with urgent inquiries as well! One question was: How can I be an effective and honorable leader and community builder? We responded to the question with another: What is a leader? Together we created our

own definition. Their responses—"visionary," "fearless," "diplomatic," "serene in a sea of chaos," "empathetic," "flexible," "humorous," "generous," "knowledgeable," and "encouraging"—will remain with them far longer that any text could provide. Generating the list spurred on the social constructivist approach needed to build understanding.

When we prepared our course outline for this "Principalship" course, we asked ourselves: What would have engaged us if we had been offered a similar course in our beginning years as school administrators? We determined that practical help in dealing with difficult people, in developing and writing grant proposals, and in using ways to organize to multi-task, and developing techniques to maintain a work-life balance were some of the issues we could all share. We were very aware that the professionals in this course, principals, vice-principals, and a few aspiring leaders would have much to teach. Based on the topics on our course outline, the students brought us professional articles, copied for everyone, as well as letters on a wide range of topics written to their communities, and stories from their daily experiences both real and challenging. The communities in which these students were leaders represented a range of schools from the Youth sector (both elementary and secondary), as well as centres from the Adult and Vocational sectors. One student worked in a school dedicated to students with learning and physical difficulties. By developing an atmosphere of collegiality and trust we were able to tackle challenges that arise for both school and centre administrators. Together we found commonalities and differences, aware that our varied journeys in education require flexibility and openness to change. Above all, they require empathy for those we teach and lead: comfort, caring, freedom and fun.

If you have ever watched as a young child painted or built a tower of blocks, you will know that engagement lies in the creation of a personal project. University of Alberta professor Sylvia Chard (2001) defines a project as "an in-depth investigation of a real-world topic worthy of attention and effort." We witnessed the power of project in our graduate class. Students were asked to pick a real-school problem and brainstorm solutions in small groups. Topics included such themes as surviving recess and lunch, bridging the gap to high school for special-needs students, supporting new teachers, and getting tenured teachers on board. The interest was palpable, not only among the team members, but among the audience as well. Each project was worthy of presentation at a conference. Each student had answered a question that was real and important.

Our graduate students gave us their best. From PowerPoint® presentations to modeled staff meetings, and newly developed brochures to personal learning journals, their commitment to ongoing learning rewarded our efforts to build a professional learning community. They were engaged in building this community and in collaboratively constructing new knowledge of visionary leadership.

Tom, one of our graduate students, is the Centre Director of a vocational school on the outskirts of Montreal. He is so proud of the students and staff in his centre. He invited us to his Open House. We had been so impressed with Tom's contributions to our class that we were certain a visit to his context would give us insights into motivation and engagement in adult learners. What we witnessed was a lesson in, and a definition of, engagement leading to excellence.

Our visit to Tom's centre exceeded our expectations. Many of the students in the centre had arrived laden with the baggage of failure, frustration and defeat. They were leaving as master craftsmen and craftswomen. We met students who were proud of their accomplishments, and teachers who were preparing to celebrate their students' successes. Cabinetmakers, landscape artists, nursing assistants, administrative assistants, home builders and homecare workers were demonstrating their skills and handiwork. Displays around the centre boasted the students' "portfolios" as Tom called them. The tour of this facility was a lesson in student engagement. We wished that every student could experience the joy of creating by being exposed to adequate tools and to expert guidance.

Making a Space for Learning

As educators, it is indeed our "being" and "doing" that engages students. It becomes our mandate to provide the kind of classrooms that invite learning to occur. We must provide classrooms where students, regardless of age or level, have freedom of choice; know their voices are heard; create their own knowledge under masterful guidance; feel they belong to a community; and, simply enjoy as they learn. Classrooms must be a place where teachers are challenging students to dream and to question. In such a place, the teacher says, "Together we will make sense of the world." This is learning. This is the power of the personal.

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School Bonding: Helping At-Risk Youth Become Students At-Promise

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if non at-risk and four types of at-risk secondary school students perceive school bonding differently. Findings indicate there are differences between the two groups of students on affective, cognitive and behavioral components of school bonding, although no differences were found between at-risk types. Girls showed stronger bonds to school while boys who were depressed were less affiliated to peers and fostered more negative attitudes towards teachers than other students.

Promoting students' achievement and graduation and preventing school dropout have been established as important goals in a number of studies in education in the past decade (Rumberger, 1995). Researchers studying school dropout have focused on identifying aspects of schooling which contribute to the probability that a student will leave school prematurely (risk factors) while others have identified protective factors which contribute to increasing the likelihood that a student will persevere and succeed in obtaining a diploma. The evidence suggests that not all personal, family-related or school-related factors influence all students in a similar fashion (Fortin, Royer, Potvin, Marcotte & Yergeau, 2004); however, when a student displays several risk factors, the student is then considered *at-risk*. When attempting to prevent school dropout and increase graduation rates, educators generally focus on school factors as those seem to be the best means to help turn the tide for students from an *at-risk* to an *at-promise* status (Sanders, 2000).

Although there are several school-related factors present in the literature on school dropout (Fortin et al., 2004; Garnier, Stein & Jacobs, 1997; Rumberger, 1995), school bonding has been found to be a significant protective factor that helps eliminate dropout (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson & Abbott, 2001; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie & Saylor, 1999). Theoretical models have positioned school bonding as contributing to the risk level (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Tinto, 1987) and the academic developmental trajectories of students (Finn, 1989) or as a predictor of the outcome of either graduation or dropout. In this article the concept of school bonding will be defined; studies focusing on school bonding in at-risk students will then be presented, along with different profiles of at-risk students.

Maddox and Prinz (2003) and Libbey (2004) reviewed the literature to consolidate the theoretical models that define school bonding. Researchers generally rely on one of two models that define school bonding, namely Hirschi's (1969) control theory or Catalano and Hawkins' (1996) social development model (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Both models include attachment (close affective relationships) and commitment (investment in school and doing well) as two defining elements of school bonding.

In her critical review of the literature on school bonding, Libbey (2004) found nine constructs present in most studies aimed at assessing the bond students establish with school. The five most prevalent were teacher support, academic/student engagement, peer support/affiliation, general appreciation of school and discipline/fairness. School bonding thus represents a comprehensive concept involving affective (attachment), cognitive (commitment) and behavioral (involvement) components.

Although some studies have focused on the elements that make up the three basic constructs of school bonding, such as involvement measured through student engagement (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; Furrer & Skinner, 2003), or attachment as viewed through teacher support (Klem & Connell, 2004; Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007), or peer support (Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007), few have focused specifically on the influence of school bonding on school outcomes in at-risk students. Those researchers who did often focused on one dimension of school bonding such as commitment (Finn & Rock, 1997) or attachment measured through the student-teacher relationship (Baker, 2006; Fortin et al., 2004; Janosz & Fallu, 2003; Lessard, Fortin, Joly, Royer & Blaya, 2004) or through peer affiliation/support (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Murdock, 1999). Findings from these studies indicate that positive commitment and attachment to both teachers and peers tend to decrease the dropout risk.

Catalano's and Hawkins' research groups are among the few to report significant results on school bonding with at-risk and non at-risk students (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2001). Findings from the Seattle Social Development and the Raising Healthy Children research projects, which followed respectively 808 students from first grade to 27 years of age and 938 students over the course of 12 years, indicate theoretical and empirical support for school bonding. They suggest it is a critical element in the developmental trajectories of students. Results show that in addition to increasing academic achievement and social competence, strong school bonding contributes to decreasing school dropout (Catalano et al., 2004).

In a longitudinal study focusing on the academic achievement and social adaptation of 810 secondary school students (54% males; 46% females) using repeated measures evaluating personal, family and school-related risk factors, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer and Joly (2006) identified four types of students placed at risk for school dropout. Their clustering analysis enabled them to categorize these types as: 1) the Antisocial Covert Behavior type; 2) the Uninterested in School type; 3) the School and Social Adjustment Difficulties type and 4) the Depressive type of at-risk students. All four types share some common characteristics: they show significantly higher levels of depression, report lower scores on both parental emotional support and family organization and perceive less order and organization in the classroom than do other students.

Beyond these characteristics, the factors which place the Antisocial Covert Behavior students at risk are their covert antisocial behaviors (stealing and cheating, for example) and their low levels of family cohesion and parental control. The Uninterested in School type of student is the largest group and the one which most resembles non at-risk students. They perform well in school, are well liked by their teachers but lack motivation towards schoolwork. Students with School and Social Adjustment Difficulties compose the second most important group and the one which presents the greatest challenge for educators as they show high levels of depression and delinquency and display both high levels of behavior problems and the lowest academic achievement levels of all students. Finally, beyond their high scores on the depression scale, with 42% reporting suicidal thoughts, the Depressive type of student shows the most negative scores on all family functioning scales.

Few studies have focused on school bonding in at-risk students although research indicates that low school bonding contributes to increasing the potential for dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Catalano et al., 2004). Thus, it seems important to

study school bonding in secondary school students while paying attention to the different profiles of at-risk students. Considering the constructs defining school bonding and the specific vulnerabilities of middle school students (Baker, 2006), the purpose of this study was to investigate if there is a difference between at-risk and non at-risk middle school students on school bonding as defined by attachment (teacher support, peer support/affiliation), commitment (students' perception of rules and their attitudes towards school) and involvement (student engagement).

Methodology

In order to reach the research objectives, 715 8th grade students (349 boys and 366 girls) from the Eastern Townships in the province of Quebec were asked and consented to participate in this study. The students who were recruited were 14 years old on average and attended six different urban schools that were considered under-privileged.

Beyond academic achievement in mathematics, and either French or English (depending on the language of instruction) obtained from the schools, students provided answered to six questionnaires chosen on the basis of their psychometric properties (Fortin et al.'s, 2006). These tools were used to identify at-risk students and to place them in one of the four at-risk types. The tool used to evaluate the dropout risk was *Decisions* (Quirouette, 1988). Composed of 39 questions, this questionnaire covers six dimensions: family environment, personal characteristics, school plans, academic abilities, student-teacher relationship and school motivation. The *Family Assessment Device* (FAD, Epstein, Connors and Salinas, 1983) is composed of 60 questions measuring the social and environmental characteristics of the family. As this is a self-reported tool, it evaluates the student's perception of how his/her family is functioning. The *Classroom Environmental Scale* (CES, Moos and Tricket, 1987) measures the classroom social climate and school bonding with scales focusing on student commitment, affiliation to peers, perceived teacher support, order and organization in the classroom, appropriateness of tasks, competition with peers, understanding of the rules and teacher control and innovation. Each scale consists of five statements to which the student responds either "true" or "false." The *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL, Achenbach, 1991) evaluates externalized (aggressive behavior and delinquency) and internalized (anxiety, depression, withdrawal) behavior problems. For each of the 113 questions, the student chooses an answer on a three-point Likert-type scale. The *Behavior Assessment System for Children* (BASC, Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992) measures

the student's behavior using 130 questions composing 12 scales. In the context of this study, two scales were used, namely, the student's attitude towards the teacher and his or her attitude towards the school. The scales represent a total of 19 questions to which the student answers by "true" or "false." Finally, the *Beck Depression Index* (BDI, Beck, 1978) is composed of 21 statements assessing the intensity of emotional, behavioral, cognitive and somatic symptoms characteristic of depression. For each statement, the student selects an answer from a choice of four, from 0 to 3.

School bonding was assessed using the combination of five scales from the CES (Moos & Tricket, 1987) and two attitude scales found in the *BASC* (Reynolds and Kamphaus, 1992) which Maddox and Prinz (2003) deemed appropriate for measuring attachment and commitment.

After having been informed of the purpose of the study by the school principal, students received the written description of the research project and the consent form to be signed by willing participants and their parents. The students who agreed to participate answered the questionnaires in their classrooms, during a 90-minute period of class time, supervised by trained research assistants. Data collection occurred during the spring of 2002.

Findings

In order to attain research objectives, the first step was to determine the number of at-risk students and to assess to which type they belonged. The results of the scores obtained on the *Decisions* (Quirouette, 1988) measure of dropout risk, indicated that 134 boys (38.4%) and 136 (37.2%) girls were considered at-risk while 215 boys and 230 girls were not. Forty-six students (21 boys, 25 girls) belonged to the Antisocial Covert Behavior type, 57 (41 boys, 16 girls) were Uninterested in School, 128 (58 boys, 70 girls) had School and Social Adjustment Difficulties and 39 (14 boys, 25 girls) were Depressive.

In order to determine whether there were differences in the students' perception of school bonding, researchers assessed gender and the four at-risk types against all the school bonding scales described earlier (multivariate analysis of covariance). Age and academic achievement were included in the process because of their potential confounding effects.

The results indicate that there were highly significant group and gender effects as well as a smaller but still significant group and gender interaction effect on the school bonding constructs. At-risk and non at-risk students show significant differences across all measures of school bonding with attitudes toward teachers and school being the two elements with the highest influence. Results suggest that all four at-risk types show significantly less favorable scores on attachment, commitment and involvement than the non at-risk group. Further analysis (discriminant analysis) performed with only the at-risk types allowed researchers to investigate the ways in which the four types differ one from another. Findings indicate that while at-risk students are all consistently different from the non at-risk students, there are no differences between students belonging to the four at-risk types.

When gender was considered (univariate analysis for gender effect), findings indicate that overall, girls reported better bonding to school than boys, specifically in terms of engagement, affiliation, clarity of rules, and general attitude toward teachers and school. When considering both gender and types of students in the analysis (univariate tests), only two elements were found to be of some significance, namely affiliation and the attitude toward teacher. Globally, boys belonging to the Depressive type report fewer affiliations with peers and a more negative attitude towards teachers than other students.

Discussion

Two trends stem from the results of this study. First, there is a significant difference between the four at-risk types and non at-risk students on all measures of school bonding, with at-risk students obtaining more negative scores than their classmates. At-risk students foster more negative attitudes towards both their teachers and school, they are less affiliated to their peers and show lower levels of engagement in school than do non at-risk students. Little research has taken place to date to assess the influence of school bonding on school outcomes in at-risk students. The researchers who have assessed this influence have reported significant differences between at-risk and non at-risk students (Baker, 2006; Catalano et al., 2004, Fortin et al., 2004, Lessard et al., 2004). However, each of these studies investigated one particular type of student or one specific construct linked with school bonding, as opposed to several school bonding measures for different types of students. Baker (2006) documented school bonding with primary school students displaying behavior problems or learning difficulties. Catalano et al. (2004) focused on behavior problems.

Fortin et al. (2004) and Lessard et al. (2004) reported results on teacher-student relationships with at-risk secondary school students. As at-risk students have long been categorized as displaying either behavior problems or learning difficulties, it follows that little is known to date on school bonding as it pertains to the other types of at-risk students, such as students who are uninterested in school or who are depressed.

The second trend relates to gender. Generally, girls fared better than boys on most school bonding measures, a finding which was anticipated and confirms previous research (Baker, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Simons-Morton et al., 1999). An interesting finding among the boys belonging to the Depressive type: was that they are less affiliated to peers and show more negative attitudes towards teachers than do other students. As none of the work on school bonding included the influence of depression in their research, our findings relating to depressive boys are unprecedented in this field of study. However, in studying internalized behavior problems in middle school students, Marcotte, Cournoyer, Gagné and Bélanger (2005) documented the lack of affiliation to peers in depressive boys, which they attributed to the poor social skills they had. The researchers suggested that this trend should be investigated further. In terms of depressive boys' relationships with teachers, results from a previous study show that boys who perceive their relationship with teachers as negative are placed at greater risk of dropping out of school than other students (Lessard et al., 2004). Male dropouts also talk about the conflicts with teachers which contributed to their decision to leave school prematurely (Lessard et al., in press). This evidence suggests that boys may be more sensitive to the affective aspect of the bonds they establish with peers and teachers and may, in turn, modify their behavior in a response to the lack of perceived affective support.

These two trends have some important implications for teachers. As was stated earlier the affective, cognitive and behavioral components of school bonding are involved in promoting the bond that students build and maintain with the school and more specifically with teachers and peers. Knowing that students with specific characteristics may experience a greater challenge in becoming and remaining engaged in school, educators need to identify these students and to structure educational activities aimed at increasing their bond to school and decreasing the probability that they will leave school before graduating. Although it could be argued that focusing on the student's *deficits* only increases the negative perception which some attribute to *at-risk* students, it could equally be argued that assessing the student's risk status may provide educators with a means to identify who may or may not require more help. Knowing that the support a teacher offers his or her students contributes to enhancing the bond to school through an affective element, teachers

should be more aware of the quality of the relationships they establish with students as it also affects both the cognitive development and the behavioral outcomes of students. In essence, teachers can contribute to changing the students' own perceptions of whether they are *at-risk* or whether they can be considered *at-promise*. Knowing that the students' attitudes towards the teacher and the school are the two elements which seem to have the greatest influence on the level of school bonding, efforts should be devoted to providing students with contexts in which they feel supported and cared for. This would help them have more positive self perceptions as students and thus increase their bond to school.

This study has limitations. The results were obtained using self-reported measures and did not take into account other perspectives, such as those of educators which could have provided a more rounded understanding of school bonding. Interviews with students, teachers and administrators could have provided a more contextualized picture of school bonding in middle school students.

Conclusion

This study on school bonding in middle school students compared four at-risk types of students to their classmates on attachment, commitment and involvement. All four at-risk types presented significantly more negative scores on all measures than did other students. Girls reported being more engaged and better affiliated with their peers, perceiving rules as clearer and displaying better attitudes towards both the teachers and the school than did boys. Boys belonging to the Depressive type of students showed lower attachment (less affiliated to peers and fostered more negative attitudes towards teachers) than did other students. Finally, the innovative contribution of this study highlights the importance that students attribute to their bond to school and, more particularly, to their relationships with teachers and their general attitude towards school.

In attempting to find effective avenues to increase student perseverance and achievement, this study contributes findings which highlight the need for intervention on two specific targets. First, as was stated by Finn and Rock (1997), school bonding and, more specifically, student engagement may act as protective factors and could therefore be reinforced by school personnel, especially for students who are placed at risk of dropping out of school. Second, boys belonging to the Depressive type seem to be particularly vulnerable to the lack of positive support

from teachers and interactions with peers. Helping these students establish better social skills may contribute to increasing their attachment to school and consequently decreasing their dropout risk level.

Changing the lens through which students are perceived from *at-risk* youth to students *at-promise*, looking at the students' strengths and working with them to alleviate their obstacles to success represents an important challenge which, if successfully achieved by school personnel, could contribute to changing the educational trajectories of a large group of students.

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LINK TO:

http://www.usherbrooke.ca/education/personnel/professeur/as/lessardanne.html

Flow

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ABSTRACT

What is student engagement? How do teachers engage their students? As a way to address these questions, I used collage as an arts-informed method for exploring the subject of student engagement. The collages are displayed and I describe the process of producing this work.

*A*s an art form, collage thrives on spontaneity and intuitiveness, and encourages discovery. As a method in research, collage becomes a process of learning to see and seeing to learn (Markus, 2007). In this brief essay, I describe the process of creating a series of collages that I have entitled *Flow*.

As I began thinking about the topic of student engagement, the first thing that came to mind was a photograph I had seen of two children squatting on a beach looking at something. They were so immersed in what they were doing that they were oblivious to the camera. This image became the springboard for the collage process, which I believed would help me find the words to describe the experience depicted in the photograph.

I began the collage by holding the snapshot of the two children in my mind as I spontaneously selected images from magazines. I tried to represent the feeling portrayed in the photograph rather than to visually represent the picture. Once I had collected enough images, I glued them onto three small cards, using an intuitive, rather than calculated approach for creating the composition. The next step was "translating" the images into words on a literal level by describing them with as little interpretation as possible. I listed them: suspension bridge of the water, part of a metal arc, a chestnut still attached to the branch, cracked open, spherical light bulbs, branches of trees, calm water. In this way, the images were transformed into textual metaphors of experience. I then transformed the list into more abstract terms. For example, the bridge could be seen as *reaching/bridging*; the nut cracked open, as the *core*; the light bulbs, as having *internal energy*; the branches, as *reaching/spreading*; and the water, as *flow* (hence, the title of the collages, *Flow*)

From these words, I was able to see an aspect of student engagement that I was unable to put into words before. The role of teaching and of engaging students ("spreading flow") involves reaching out and tapping into the internal energy. Students need space to express what comes from within them. There is always that energy at the core.

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Line Up Your Ducks! Teachers First!: Teachers and Students Learning With Laptops in a Teacher Action Research Project

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are increasingly expected to incorporate technology into their practices. However, they need experiences with using new technologies in their classrooms and support to talk about and reflect on those experiences. "Teachers first" was one of the main principles that Lankshear and Synder (2000) identified as key to teachers incorporating new technologies into their practice. To put this principle into place, you need to "line up your ducks": there needs to be a structure, sustained support for that structure, and opportunities for active teacher participation. This article links findings from the first year of the "Learning with Laptops" project by focusing on the most experienced "teacher learners" and connects it with the research literature on teacher and student engagement. The findings contribute support for the principle: teachers (as learners) first!

> "…a teacher teaches you how to learn principally by learning himself [sic]." (Gatto, 2000 cited in Burrington & Sortino, 2004, p. 227)

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"Teachers first." It may seem strange to begin with this statement in a journal issue devoted to student engagement. The assertion comes from Colin Lankshear and Bill Synder (2000, p. 61), who investigated how Australian teachers were integrating new technologies into their classrooms. Over and over, they heard the same refrain: if teachers lacked support for resources or knowledge, change was unlikely. They concluded that teachers, themselves, needed first to be involved in authentic learning experiences with new media in order to also engage their students. Student engagement hinges on teachers feeling part of a learning process with, or alongside their students; this was one of the findings in an issue of a journal on student engagement (Portelli & Butler-Kisber, 2003). "Teachers first" was also one of the most significant outcomes of the research that is the subject of this paper.

The study is based on a teacher action research partnership project, "Changing Literacies and Changing Formations" (CLCF) through "Learning with Laptops" (LWL), in which seven teachers gather together once a month as well as participate in a teacher blog to share what they are learning as they integrate laptop computers into their classroom practice.[1] Teacher action research involves teachers, on their own and/or with academics, in systematic inquiry on an issue or a question of significance to them and/or their students (Dewey, 1933; Kemmis & McTaggar, 2000); moreover, teachers are uniquely positioned to generate the kind of knowledge that will directly inform practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Two elements have been key to teacher engagement in the project: a supportive social context and sustained opportunities to experience, and experiment with, new technologies in the classroom.

The idea of the teacher as a learner challenges the traditional notion that the teacher is the only, or main, expert in the classroom. It brings into question the traditional divide between teacher education and professional development, which Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), in their review of teacher education, also challenge. Do teachers continue to learn after they complete their schooling and university training? Yes, they do, and the research confirms this, whether we look at teachers as researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Katch, 2001; Kincheloe, Slatterly & Steinberg, 2000; Paley, 1981, 2004) or recent scholarship on teachers learning in social contexts and forming professional learning communities (Burrington & Sortino, 2004; Butler et al., 2004; Glazer, Abbott & Harris, 2004; Henson, 2001; Jenlink & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001; Pianfetti, 2001; Strong-Wilson, 2007).

Wheatley (2002) maintains that "human beings have always sat in circles and councils to do their best thinking" (p. 9). In the company of others, we can summon the courage to face change, and be creative in the process. Given the increasing pressure on teachers to incorporate technology within their practice (Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer & O'Connor, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2004) and the shifting of a dominant print literacy into an electronic and multimodal one, teachers need opportunities to gather together as one story world passes into the building of another one (Mackey, 2006). Whereas teachers' literacy formations have largely occurred through encounters with the oral and written word (Brandt, 1992; Brown, 1999), as well as through television (Gee, 2003), students bring literacy formations that differ from those of their teachers. As Mackey (2002, 2003) has documented, young people are reading multiple "texts," including books and television, but also CD-ROMs, DVDs, video games, and the Internet. With literacy formations changing, childhoods are also undergoing transformation (Buckingham, 2000; Jones, Williams, & Fleuriot, 2003). Individuals tend to become deeply attached to the experiences that formed an integral, and positive, part of growing up, and that in adulthood, become interwoven with reveries of an idealized childhood (Chawla, 1994; Goodenough, 2004; Philo, 2001; Strong-Wilson, 2006). Because "what counts as evidence of literate competence is a key issue in determining children's futures in a democratic society" (Meek, 2004, p. 308), teachers need to open themselves to new possibilities. The most experienced person is not someone who has acquired the most expertise; it is someone who can be "radically undogmatic" so as to bring beliefs and practices into question and open herself to new experiences (Gadamer, 1975/1998, p. 355).

The current research project is based upon the principle of actively involving teachers in the changes that affect their classrooms. The project is presently entering its second year, with data collection and analysis still under way; this next year (2007-2008) will focus on the relationship between teacher and student engagement in learning. However, we believe that enough evidence has been accumulated to show the importance of "teachers first" in engaging students with new technologies that we share some of it here. In the process, we attempt to reproduce the importance of teacher conversation in the research, focusing on one of the school teams: Kelly and Manuela. Consistent with the argument in this article, Kelly and Manuela have been teacher learners the longest in the project, having been with "Learning with Laptops" since its inception in 2004. We also highlight the reflections of Bob Thomas, the pedagogical technology expert, who has been leading the teachers in the LWL project.

Teacher Conversation

K: (Kelly) It started with me because I'd previously been the computer teacher for a year and I had some background knowledge … and I remember thinking, 'Yes that could be interesting, but who would I do it with?'—I would have to have a partner. I wasn't Manuela's partner at the time. And approaching her and saying, 'Hey, have a look at this. You like computers too, or you're starting to get into that kind of computer mode, and …'

M: (Manuella) Yes, the reason I joined is because Kelly asked me and because … well, the first reason is because I really respected her as a teacher. I felt that I could trust her. Because I didn't know her much, but I wouldn't have associated with a teacher on a projects tht I didn't think I could work with, so that was the first reason. And the other big motivator for me was that I knew nothing of computers. I just knew how to prepare a Word document …

K: You had a beginning fascination with computers … because you would ask me—

M: Oh, no. That's why—I had the desire to learn, that's what started it because all I could do was type up an exam, to see the information that the kids retained, and I thought, that's not what it's about, and I had been trying to incorporate it in class but I never was successful. I didn't know how and I didn't have anyone helping me. Like I always say, I went through so many stages and that's why this is a good opportunity, I trust Kelly and it looks like an interesting project, and she knows more than me, she'll help me … (laughing) (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

Line Up Your Ducks

Jim is a firm believer. We're all believers, I suppose, in the sense that we really feel that there is some potential to facilitate learning, and as Jim likes to say, even transform learning through the use of technology. So there was this underlying will and belief system in place. (Bob Thomas, interview, April 12, 2007)

To create a supportive context for teacher learning, you need to "line up your ducks," drawing on the resources that you have and infusing them with a vision for the future (Bob Thomas, interview, April 12, 2007). The idea for the New Frontiers School Board's [NFSB] teacher action research project was the inspiration of Jim Sullivan (Director of Educational Services at NFSB) and Bob Thomas (Pedagogical Technology Consultant at NFSB). NFSB is situated on Montreal's south shore.

> In Bob's words,
> We started small … with a lab of 17 laptops … the rationale was that you create the winning conditions in which integration of technology can produce results. We [Jim and I] were of the belief that technology was positive. There was something that was potentially quite transformative for learning, but we wanted to do it in our own context, within our own schools, with our own constraints, and to see that we could make it work. But at the same time, we wanted to remove some of the obstacles like: access to enough technology, access to stable, functional, working technology, access to support for technology. So by creating these winning conditions and putting in all the enablers and removing the obstacles, we wanted to see, okay, what then? *Now* would they make an impact and how? (Bob Thomas, interview, April 12, 2007)

"Learning with Laptops" has been in place in the school board for three years. The school board initially secured funding for teacher release time by obtaining funds made available through a special governmental measure. The school board purchased the laptops and necessary peripherals, beginning with the 17 machines, which rotated through three different grade six classrooms for fifty days at a time throughout each school year from 2004 to 2005. Then they purchased twenty-three additional computers, for a total of forty laptops as well as a camcorder, two digital still cameras, four webcams, a hard drive, a dedicated server, four wireless routers, laptop transport cases and student backpacks. Two schools also purchased laptops (two each) with their school budgets, while the principals of two other schools who were supportive of the project's goals bought Smartboards for their teachers. At the present time, enough laptops exist to provide class sets to three classrooms over the entire school year.

Teams of teachers were invited to submit proposals to the board. The school board was looking for iniatives that would create complex learning situations or longitudinal projects based on meaningful and regular use of the laptops. In this latest call for proposals (the project was due to begin in September 2006), three teams were

successful in their applications. Seven teachers became participants in the teacher action research project. Three different schools are currently involved. Four teachers teach Cycle Three (Grade 6); within the teaching teams, one teacher instructs in English, the other in French. Another three teachers teach Grade 7 students in Secondary One; two teachers teach in English and one in French. For the first time in the Laptops Program, elementary and secondary teachers are sitting at the same table. Furthermore, of the four elementary teachers, two are peer coaches, which represents a Board initiative to build teacher capacity through literacy coaching by having two teachers from the first Laptops project participate in the second round. Literacy coaching has been receiving increasing approbation as a way for teachers to motivate the practices of their fellow teachers (Bauman, 2007). The coaches are Kelly and Manuela.

Like the school board and LWL, the CLCF McGill research team focuses on teacher action research, using methodological tools that will assist teachers with documentation of and reflection on their inquiry with technology. Research team members conduct regular reflective interviews with the teachers, engage in participant observation in classrooms, and provide opportunities for teachers to view and reflect on videotaped lessons. The key to sustaining teacher reflection and momentum, however, rests in the in-person and on-line forums; the in-person forum takes place one day a month. Bob Thomas leads these sessions, with the McGill team taking the lead for part of the morning or providing support for activities that Bob and Teresa (member of the McGill team) have jointly agreed upon. Teachers respond to writing prompts, complete surveys, write and discuss literacy autobiographies; in short, they reflect on where they have come from and where they are going, and how they can support one another in this learning endeavor. In the teacher blog, they continue their conversations, sharing practices and posting examples from classroom projects (in the planning stages or already implemented). Multiple avenues for individual, small group and whole group exploration and reflection exist.

Teacher Conversation

K: (Kelly) Well, anything about technology interests me, so, that was a no-brainer. I definitely wanted to be part of it, but I wasn't sure how it would turn out. I knew a bit about computers, but not a lot, and I had never used computers with children above grade three. No—sorry, that's not true, I did.

M: (Manuella) Well … in the lab.

K: I did it with the older children but it was only part-time.

M: We had a mobile, like a lab on wheels, with PCs, or laptops, and I had tried that. But they weren't wireless and—it was a fiasco, every time I borrowed them and brought them to class it was not a nice experience …

T: (Teresa) How come?

M: Well, for one, there was always something breaking down.

K: No support. No one there could help.

M: No technician. They were not very good computers, they weren't state of the art, there was always something wrong. And just the wires, and figuring out how to connect them—so, I just gave up, then I thought, maybe with this, if somebody could be there with me—I [would spend] all lunch hour setting them up sometimes to make sure they would work, and then still, something would happen. So I didn't feel very good …

K: And that was one of the conditions of the Learning with Laptops Project. In the outline it said you would be supplied with state of the art technology as well as support from the board. If we hadn't had the support and had just been given the laptops like previous[ly], I would-n't have accepted it. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007).

Engaging Learners

The word motivation comes from the Latin *movere*, meaning "to move." Learning cannot be forced or controlled by external sources or pressures (Hall, 2005). Teachers need to exert an influence over change (Kimonena & Nevalainen, 2005). Collaboration with colleagues plays a key role (Butler et al., 2004; Little, 2002; Pianfetti, 2001), creating spaces for professional growth by offering colleagues the opportunity to share and reflect on practices and co-construct knowledge and conceptual frame-works (Kimonena & Nevalainen, 2005). Engaged teachers want to engage their students; they want to know what moves their students to feel, think and behave in ways that relate positively to learning. As Doucet (2006) argues, teachers can develop deeper insights into student engagement by also delving into their past experiences as students.

In the following section, we connect some of our research data to principles of teacher and student engagement that we identified in the existing body of literature. We wanted to see whether what the key players in the LWL project identified as best practice was supported by the literature.

The research on teacher engagement centers on three principles: the provision of support; opportunity for teacher reflection on past and present practices; and teacher openness to new learning. The student engagement literature, which draws on socio-cognitive models, can be distilled to five principles: ability and efficacy (belief in an ability to do something); control and autonomy (a belief in being able to do it on one's own); intrinsic motivation (an interest in the activity for its own sake); subjective task value (an activity is viewed as important); and goal orientation (a belief that engaging in the activity will lead towards achieving a goal). Each of the teacher and student principles is taken up in turn, with examples provided from the project. What has become clear, during the course of the first year of the project, and building on the previous iteration, is that teacher engagement "moves" student engagement, which moves teacher engagement, thus generating a reciprocal feedback loop of engaged learners: teacher and student.

Principle 1: *Teachers need support in their learning process, especially from administrators (Hall, 2005; Pianfetti, 2001). Working with others generates the energy to sustain momentum, especially when challenges are faced (Butler et al., 2004).*

Example: "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank" writes novelist J. M. Coetzee (2003, p. 1). Bob Thomas talked about a project in which he had once invested a great deal of time and effort. The political tides changed and the group dissipated, leaving Bob at loose ends, and wondering what happened to all the momentum and work. Even if learning begins in a state of uncertainty, once a journey begins, there needs to be a belief that it will go somewhere. To have trust in the conviction that it will depends on active participation, but it also relies on concrete and sustained support throughout the journey.

T: (Teresa) So what's kept you in the project?
K: (Kelly) Bob … (laughing)
M: (Manuela) The support.
K: Yes, the support …
M: The support and the fact that we keep learning; it keeps changing. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

When teachers are provided with support, as through a teacher action research framework, they are more willing to "grapple with their own journey" (Bob Thomas, April 12, 2007) and to "keep learning" (Manuela, April 12, 2007). Teachers rely on the support of administrators; they also rely on one another. The key support provided to teachers in the LWL project has come from Bob Thomas who, as the pedagogical technology expert, is committed to honouring teacher knowledge by becoming intimately familiar with teacher action research methodologies.

Principle 2: *To be effective, teacher incorporation of technology must come about through an experiential process of action and reflection. Teachers need time and ongoing opportunities to change their pedagogical beliefs and develop new conceptual knowledge as it relates to their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).*

Example:

K: (Kelly) Bob always stressed, 'Stop thinking about the programs you have, think about what is it you have to teach the students'—

M: (Manuela) Pedagogy.

K: And then, how could the technology facilitate it? Whereas in the first year, I think I was still stuck on … okay, I want to use CMAP, what will I do with CMAP? Instead of thinking, well I want to do a graphic organizer, and *then* thinking about the technology. So for sure my planning has changed a lot and there's so many things now that we can do as opposed to the first two years because we realize all the different aspects.

M: The way we plan has changed—it's not well, how can I use this program, but, *this* is what I want to accomplish with the kids. It's pedagogy, and *then* how I am going to use the tool. Which would be the easiest, should I have them sharing in a forum, or a blog, or …? That's what keeps us going. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)[2]

One example of an engaged use of CMAP came from another LWL classroom. The grade 6 students were working on language arts exams, one portion of which involved designing and marketing a product. On the day on which we videotaped this activity, the teacher was modeling CMAP for the first time on the Smartboard, introducing the strategy so that students could revisit and remap the marketing plans for their products by distilling the most salient points and then rephrasing these, using vivid, detailed language. As we circulated throughout the classroom, the students readily took to the task, while the teacher periodically reminded them to focus on the language they were using and not be distracted by

fonts or other display aspects. Students demonstrated how their language in the CMAP was more detailed than what they had provided in web displays in their exam booklets. Once they had completed their CMAP, they could then explore other options within the program, including how to use surface features (like glitter letters) to attract the eye (Classroom videotaping, May 18, 2007). Technology does not drive teaching; pedagogy informs the incorporation of new technologies in the classroom. It takes time, practice, and dialogue with others to creatively and authentically incorporate technology into pedagogy.

Principle 3: *Teachers need to bring a willingness to learn and explore changes to their practices (Butler, et al., 2004; Van Eekelen et al., 2006).*

Example: By introducing the teachers to new practices, usually in the afternoons of the monthly meetings, Bob challenged the teachers to not only see technology within a wider lens, but also to experience it within the session, put it to work, and thus expand their notions of literacy.

> Some teachers have used technology as a reward (you know, when you do it conventionally and then you can do it as a reward—[*now* you're free to] go on the computer). Or when you've written your rough draft on paper, then you can put in the computer. And that's not allowing anything to be transformative … We've seen … glimmers of … transformations when the kids can use technology to write to an authentic audience, when they can blog and get responses from the outside or they can videoconference with other people—a quote-unquote, authentic audience—or somebody out there that they can really feel that they're being listened to, that they're publishing for a purpose. (Bob Thomas, interview, April 12, 2007)

Technological innovations have kept Bob and the teachers on their toes. As Manuela said, "we keep learning, and it keeps changing" (Interview; April 12, 2007). Kelly is now looking at how she can use iWeb to create personal web pages, while Manuela is interested in podcasting and how that might lead to a student-produced radio show. The other teachers, having undergone the first iteration of LWL, have acquired preferred ways of using the technology (as well as those uses they will avoid) but all have their eye on the next innovation that they can try out for its pedagogical possibilities (Teacher Meeting; June 14, 2007).

Principle 4: *To be engaged, students need to believe they can do the task (Ability and efficacy)* When students believe that they can and will do well, they are more likely to be

motivated to engage in a particular task (Eccles, Wigfield & Shiefele, 1998). Feelings of competence are supported in students when they are presented with optimally challenging tasks, including high challenging tasks with instructional support (Deci & Ryan, 1992; Miller & Meece, 1999; Pressley, 2002).

Example: Manuela brings a deep interest in comics from her own childhood (Teacher meeting; October 19, 2006). The students also bring a familiarity with animation and cartoons, and some bring a facility with using digital media, but not necessarily in the context of using a software program called "Comic Life." Manuela was using the program with the Grade 6 students; they were co-creating a yearbook. She tried it out first, producing a "Comic Life" page using photographs and dialogue based on her own family; this practice is consistent with that of the other teachers and the second and third principles (see above). She then presented her project as a model to her students.

As a class, Manuela brainstormed with the students about the possbile topics for the yearbook comics and recorded their ideas on the blackboard. Once the students started bringing in digital photographs as well as scanned pictures and other artifacts from home, and writing the accompanying captions, Manuela discovered that their writing was formulaic and banal. She then developed peer-editing lessons using the laptops, to teach students how to write in an engaging and varied manner in their dialogue boxes. After all, this "Comic Life" was to be a remembrance of their elementary school days, containing their most treasured memories and photographs. The dialogue needed to be at its "comic" best.

Students were confident about their ability to use the software but were appropriately challenged to use the program to deepen their competence as second language speakers, readers and writers. Their confidence was also built up by Manuela, who experimented with the program, observed her students, and used pedagogy to address limitations so as to instill in students belief in their competence to use the laptops to convey an important message in French.

Principle 5: *To be engaged, students need to believe that they can do it themselves (Control and autonomy)* Student autonomy is supported in classrooms where learners exercise some choice and control. In particular, these classrooms provide opportunities for open-ended activities (Turner, 1995), meaningful choices (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996), goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1990), and self-monitoring and evaluation (Zimmerman, 2001). They also create environments that are supportive and nonthreatening (Perry & Drummond, 2002).

<u>Example:</u> The students in Kelly and Manuela's classrooms spend time in one teacher's classroom in the morning and then switch, crossing the hallway in the afternoon. Students recognize the warmth and collegiality in their teachers' partnership, which supports their autonomy as teachers. This recognition positively affects student engagement.

K: (Kelly) Well, if we were not to be partners next year … [I] don't even think about that … I can't picture who else would actually be as excited and motivated and willing …

M: (Manuela) And the kids really capture that, they're really in tune with that because they know that sometimes certain things are supposed to be given to [the] homeroom teacher and they don't even remember what homeroom they're in sometimes. They give me papers that are supposed to go with Kelly, or they don't know the journals are kept with [whom]—they just flow. They go back and forth, and if it were up to us there would be no walls, just a centre pod where they keep all their stuff and just go and get it. And the kids see our cooperation, collaboration … And I think they get that and they understand that that's the way we work and that's the way you have to work. You can't be an individual working by yourself … you're here in a society … I think that establishing that takes time and the kids already feel that from day one. They know it before they come in, they know that we're a pair. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

The students develop autonomy by their movement back and forth between classrooms. They construct a notion of autonomy that is rooted in collaboration, as their teachers work together to achieve greater autonomy in using the laptops within their own pedagogy and for the students' benefit.

<u>Principle 6:</u> *To be engaged, students need to be interested. (Intrinsic motivation)* Intrinsic motivation is characterized by engaging in an activity for its own sake. Intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to demonstrate sustained involvement in a task (Stipek, 2002) and will have better comprehension and conceptual understanding (Schiefele, 1996). Students have been shown to demonstrate higher levels of this engagement in classrooms that provide stimulating and interesting tasks (Stipek, 2002) and when presented with material and tasks that are personally meaningful (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and that incorporate real-world interactions (Aarmouste & Shellings, 2003; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks & Perencevich, 2004). Students show greater interest and involvement when teachers demonstrate caring (Murdoch & Miller, 2003; Wentzel, 1997).

<u>Example:</u> The following excerpt provides a good example of how as students' interest quickened given the opportunity to explore the new media, so too did their teacher's as she observed them figuring things out on their own.

> **K:** (Kelly) … when I had them use Apple Works to do a slideshow on a book they had read for literature circles, what I showed them was so basic, and I thought, okay, well, they'll each have three slides, one is about character, one about setting, one about plot—but they did so much more, they were finding out about biography, they were finding out about the author, they were going online to get maps, they wanted to put sound files in, but I didn't know how to do that and they were trying to figure it out [themselves]. (Kelly, interview, April 12, 2007)

<u>Principle 7:</u> *Students are engaged in learning when they perceive it is important to them (Subjective task value)* An individual's decision to perform a task—and the amount of effort that individual is willing to spend on it—depends on how much he or she values the opportunity to engage in the task as well as how much he or she values the potential rewards for performing the task well (Eccles et al., 1983). A student's value of an activity is heightened when the task is perceived to be relevant and has real-world significance (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Mitchell, 1993).

<u>Example:</u> Kelly explained: "I read, I write, I go to LWL meetings, I go to school (at university), we peer edit one another's work; in short, we live learning." Modeling is a way for the teachers to transmit a passion for learning, thus ascribing value to the control and autonomy that can come about as a result of engaging in a learning process, leading students to think: "If my teacher is doing this, then it must be important."

> **M:** (Manuela) Modeling is always really what we do, regardless if it's electronic, or on the board.
> **K:** (Kelly) But you model minimally, so they can use their imaginations, because if you show them too much, then you just get a carbon copy of what you showed them. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

Students need to perceive their own value in the activity, such as when Kelly's class read aloud *Macbeth*. Through conducting research on the Internet as well as constructing presentations based on viewing the plot from another character's point of view, students became involved in this well-trod tale and took it on as their own. The class project began, though, with Kelly's interest in valuing digital storytelling with a traditional, and favourite, text.

Principle 8: *Students feel engaged when they perceive that doing the activity takes them somewhere (Goal orientation)* When a student is interested in the knowledge to be gained from engaging in a particular task, he or she is said to have a *learning goal orientation* (Ames, 1992). Many goal theorists say that learning goals are more beneficial in engaging students than performance goals (Wigfield et al., 1998), in which students become more concerned with outperforming peers. Students are more likely to adopt a learning goal orientation in classrooms that create environments that are both cognitively and affectively supportive (Meyer & Turner, 2002). Student motivation is also enhanced in classrooms that use collaborative groups in which students are allowed to pursue social goals (Stevens & Slavin, 1995; Nichols, 1996).

Example:

K: (Kelly) I always find them engaged when they're on the laptop—

M: (Manuella) They're always on task …

K: … For one, it's because they really have to concentrate because sometimes they have to hear—if they don't have headphones they have to be closer to their laptops and they seem to block out distractions. The writing—you know with a book, they can turn around with their book or move—with the laptop if they're reading, they really have to be focused on it, and they automatically seem to be blocking things out now. And I even noticed last week, two kids got up—they didn't even ask—and moved to the book corner to sit on the floor, and I'm sure it was because the kids around them were talking and they just wanted to be more secluded. But we can put them out to work in the hallway, sitting on the floor with their laptops and they're never doing something else, they're always just focused on their work … right?

M: I never thought that it would be like that when we first started the project. I really thought we would have to monitor, to make sure that they weren't doing something off-task. (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

Their principal provided corroboration for this focused engagement: *"Never* have I walked into a grade six classroom with those laptops in the room where they are just bored or disruptive, not focused" (Principal interview, February 22, 2007; emphasis in the original). The teachers have continued to reflect on why the students are focusing more, and working together to create a climate in which it is possible to do so. They attribute part of this development to their own achievement of their goal to transform the technology into pedagogy.

K: They don't even know there are games on there yet, they haven't explored it … the chess, there's all kinds of games in there, really, they haven't figured it out. Last year they did, but not this year.

M: No. I think this year [they're] even more [focused], because we're more comfortable with the technology. The pedagogy behind it is stronger so they're on task because they have something to accomplish, something to create, something to do. They don't have the time, or the desire … (Kelly & Manuela, interview, April 12, 2007)

Conclusion

Learning does not result from the mere placement of the right ingredients in a pot: teachers, students, tools. Teachers and students discover new things by engaging in dynamic, impassioned, and sustained conversations with each other. Engaged teachers demonstrate a willingness to learn by asking questions, sharing experiences, and listening and responding to one another and to their students. To engage in learning, teachers need to know they are being heard, that the activity they are undertaking is meaningful and that they have something important to contribute to the process. Students are inspired to take risks and think creatively when their teachers do. Teachers and students may feel defeated when they are overchallenged, or bored when underchallenged. One of the ongoing goals of Learning with Laptops has been to keep both teachers and students fully committed and interested in what new technologies can contribute to their learning. This article has only touched the "tip of the iceberg" in presenting data on teacher engagement that has a direct bearing on student engagement.

Questions and challenges remain, and will be pursued in the second year of the project. How do new technologies influence engagement in learning across the curriculum? Are certain areas of learning being neglected because others are being overly prioritized? Are all students equally engaged by the new technologies? (An informal survey that Manuela and Kelly conducted in their classrooms in May, 2007 suggests that most definitely are, but some prefer reading and writing on paper.) Are educators gazing starry-eyed at PowerPoint® presentations when other work may be less glitzy but more developed? Is form being valued over content? What happens to student and teacher engagement when the tools are withdrawn or diminished? These questions are part of "grappling" with the LWL journey. Central to sustaining teacher engagement, though, has been the use of conversations to move through

problems, rather than avoiding them so as to create a "lovely story" that does not ring true with teachers' experiences (Pitt & Britzman, 2003).

"Line up your ducks." While there are many ducks to line up, the ones that Kelly, Manuela and Bob identified as absolutely crucial for engaging teachers as learners were: support and new experiences. Learners need opportunities to develop competence and exercise their creativity through experiencing learning for themselves. Learners also need to be supported in their learning, through sharing ideas, modeling and guidance, cognitively challenging contexts, encouragement and caring. Engagement, Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (1998) emphasize, is more social than individual, "nested" in interactions between people as well as in the cultural and social histories that learners bring (p. 552).

While Jim Sullivan envisaged that new technologies would transform students' learning, he didn't anticipate the degree to which teachers would be transformed as well:

> What came as a surprise to me, thanks to the leadership of Bob Thomas and to a team of dedicated and talented teachers, was the fact that student use of technology not only transformed learning but teaching as well. Conversations with the teachers involved in the LWL project were very different from conversations with their peers. Teaching strategies were more focused, evaluation was built into the process, differentiation of
> instruction was discussed and alternatives were planned in the lesson, based in individual needs. These teachers were not only enthusiastic but [also] empowered! The contribution of the research team from McGill has helped us to verbalize what was happening. (Jim Sullivan, personal communication [E-mail], April 29, 2007)

For those who have been involved in the LWL project, they know that it is really the other way around: that student engagement with the laptops likely would not have happened without the teachers learning together, receiving support for that learning, and co-constructing and scaffolding learning with their students. As we have seen from the approach to professional development taken within this innovative and sustained school-university partnership, key interactions occur between teachers, as well as between teachers and a leader. Teachers need be allowed to feel supported as learners and teachers alike: "teachers (as learners) first."

Notes

1. The research for "Changing Literacies, Changing Formations" (SSHRC, 2006-2009; 410-2006-0161) has kindly been made possible through a Social Sciences and Research Council funding. "Learning with Laptops" is supported by the New Frontiers School Board.

2. CMAP is a mind mapping software that allows students to organize ideas and establish linkages between them. As an electronic tool, students can manipulate ideas visually, without any arduous recopying or starting over. For more on CMAP, see: http://cmap.ihmc.us.

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