



# ENGAGEMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

As fans of *Star Trek* may well remember, when Captain Jean-Luc Picard pointed his finger and gave the order, 'Engage!' his command was met with swift compliance. In education it isn't so easy. Engagement can't be compelled and will always be contingent on the complexities of motivation, whether of the teacher or the learners. Indeed, several of the Best of the Best contributors in this volume – such as Sir Tim Brighouse – argue that it is teacher engagement which is the key to successful learning. Such engagement can be best facilitated in schools, suggests Vic Goddard, by encouraging activities such as professional dialogue between staff; and Richard Gerver argues that an institution's high expectations and assumption of excellence will encourage in its teachers a sense of professional engagement and empowerment. Similarly, Andy Cope – with echoes of the psychologist Eric Fromm – advises that teachers should focus on how they wish 'to be' in order to achieve the energy and empowerment to engage more effectively with their to-do list; and Professor Bill Lucas takes this responsibility for engagement a step further by focusing on ways that schools can encourage parental engagement.

The specific link between teacher engagement and learner motivation is argued persuasively by several contributors. Ian Gilbert, for example, stresses the need for teachers to behave in a way that makes our learners feel as though we like them. Professor Susan Wallace and Sue Cowley, too, argue that building a

positive teacher–learner relationship is an essential step towards improving learner engagement.

So how do we recognise learner engagement and what else can we do to encourage it? An important point made by Sue Cowley and Dr Debra Kidd is that engagement is by no means synonymous with simply ‘having fun’. Indeed, as Ian Gilbert points out, the opposite of ‘boring’ in a learning context should be ‘challenging’. The challenge must, however, as Andy Griffith argues, be one which learners feel is achievable if they are to become properly involved and absorbed in the state of ‘flow’. Conrad Wolfram, writing specifically about motivation in maths, suggests that in addition to being achievable, the challenge must be carefully chosen: not any old abstract problem but one which learners feel motivated to solve. Sue Cowley and Debra Kidd put this another way, arguing that motivation to remain engaged will always be contingent on learners being able to see the relevance, purpose and value of what they are being asked to do. Paul Dix builds on this notion, illustrating for us the importance of finding ways to engage learners’ natural curiosity with an element of anticipation, surprise or even some mild jeopardy.

A number of the contributors in this book suggest very specific strategies for optimising learner engagement. John Davitt, for example, encourages the idea of engagement as ‘doing’ – where learners are asked to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways and through means other than simply writing; while Mike Gershon suggests using discussion to help learners refine and

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articulate their ideas before they engage in a writing task. Susan Wallace, on the other hand, focuses on teacher behaviour, suggesting that one of the most effective ways of encouraging engagement is for the teacher to model the desired attitude by presenting themselves as enthusiastic and highly motivated.

A final theme that emerges among the experts' chapters is focusing on engagement in terms of appropriate learner behaviour and attitudes. Professor Mick Waters argues that in this context a gentle 'nudging' towards improved behaviour – for example, through the awarding of points – will prove more effective than the use of sanctions or shaming. Dr Bill Rogers, too, advocates a non-confrontational approach and illustrates how the teacher's verbal communications with the class can be more effective in encouraging appropriate behaviour and focus when they are descriptive and assertive rather than imperative and confrontational. Phil Beadle, however, raises the question of whether levels of engagement are largely contingent on geography and environment, suggesting that inner city schools may be facing the problem of learner disengagement on a scale not experienced elsewhere. He points out that, in the absence of other sources of motivation, the learning experience needs to be enjoyable if engagement is to be achieved.

From this compendium of expert voices, then, three important themes emerge about engagement: that teachers' engagement and positive example should be seen as a prerequisite for establishing learner motivation; that learners' interest needs to

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be actively engaged, whether by meaningful challenge or by tapping into their natural curiosity; and that an expectation of appropriate behaviour must precede expectations of engagement. And, of course, as Ian Gilbert points out, to encourage engaged behaviour we need first to banish classroom boredom. In these pages you will find many practical suggestions of ways to do exactly that.

CHAPTER 1

# TEACHERS: OUR MOST POWERFUL RESOURCE

**SIR TIM BRIGHOUSE**



**SIR TIM BRIGHOUSE** started his career as a teacher in secondary schools and later became an administrator, being chief education officer for ten years in both Oxfordshire and Birmingham local authorities. He was also head of the education department at Keele University where he founded the Centre for Successful Schools. He ended his career as commissioner for London schools where he ran the London Challenge.



The best advice I ever received on how to improve teaching, and therefore schools, came from the American educator Judith Little, whose research concluded that you knew you were in a good school when the following four characteristics were present:

1. Teachers talk about teaching.
2. Teachers observe each other teach.
3. Teachers plan, organise and evaluate together.
4. Teachers teach each other.

My reason for liking these findings is because you can easily see how you can increase or decrease the likelihood of these four things happening. For example, if the agendas of meetings are packed with administrative imperatives rather than discussion of pedagogy or curricular subtleties to aid learning, then meetings are wasted time. Conversely, starting primary staff meetings in different classrooms, with the host analysing where they are with optimising the environment for learning, will promote valuable debate – as would an agenda item where, in turns (one member per meeting), staff outline the book they are reading with their class and why it works for that age group.

Or, at secondary level, the senior leadership team (SLT) taking over the teaching of a department for a day could enable the staff to be released to visit a department in another school.

My advice, therefore, would be to have a session where all staff look at the four characteristics outlined by Judith Little and share ideas of how, with minimal effort, school practices could be adjusted to make them happen more often.

## FURTHER READING

Brighouse, Tim and Woods, David (2013). *The A-Z of School Improvement: Principles and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Education).

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

As Sir Tim Brighouse points out, developing any aspect of teaching is usually best done through collaboration with other teachers. To explore the concept of engagement in your own classroom and across your school, try initiating some of the following practices with your colleagues.

### TEACHERS TALK ABOUT TEACHING

- Organise a teaching and learning event or TeachMeet<sup>1</sup> at your school where you invite teachers from your own and other establishments to come and share useful ideas for pupil engagement that they have tried and tested in their classrooms. The traditional TeachMeet approach is to give each contributor approximately three minutes to present their idea. This allows attendees to hear an impressive quantity of suggestions and they can consult with presenters afterwards to find out more about the techniques.
- Set up a weekly 'bring a problem to breakfast' meeting. This is where breakfast is provided for staff who wish to start the day by sharing a difficulty they are experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> An organised meeting for teachers to share good practice and practical innovations with each other.

in their teaching and then obtaining helpful suggestions from other colleagues for addressing that problem.

- Launch a 'listening ear' initiative, whereby there is a different volunteer available in the staffroom at the end of each day. This volunteer's role is to offer a friendly ear and informal counsel to any colleague who wishes to debrief the events of their working day before they go home.
- Create an idea-sharing area in the staffroom. Ask colleagues to post details of something they have tried that worked well. Preferably this should be a technique that they feel could be used effectively in a variety of curriculum areas, and it could be accompanied by a photograph. This display is likely to attract a lot of readers. It is a wonderful way of encouraging a culture of innovation and of taking pleasure and pride in the job.

A and B meet to discuss what aspects of their own teaching they would like to focus on

They co-plan A's lesson

B joins A's lesson and makes notes on things she finds interesting and on points for discussion

A and B meet up to debrief the lesson

They co-plan B's lesson

Incisive, provocative thinking from a wide range of experts is smartly contextualised through practical and inventive strategies.

Helen Mulley, Editor, *Teach Secondary*

The Best of the Best series brings together – for the first time – the most influential voices in education in a format that is concise, insightful and accessible for teachers. Keeping up with the latest and best ideas in education can be a challenge – as can putting them into practice – but this highly acclaimed series is here to help.

In this third volume, the contributors share their expertise on the theme of teacher and learner engagement, which – as they ably demonstrate – can be facilitated and encouraged in a number of ways. As with all the books in this series, Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman have developed practical, realistic, cross-curricular and cross-phase strategies to make the most of these important insights in the classroom. Each expert has provided a list of further reading so you can dig deeper as you see fit. In addition, the Teacher Development Trust has outlined ideas for embedding these insights as part of effective CPD.

Suitable for all educationalists, including teachers and school leaders.

There is something for everyone in *Engagement*, making it an essential read for both new and experienced educationalists.

Rebecca Poorhady, Learning and Development Organiser,  
Midlands region, Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Featuring guidance from



Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman are authors of the bestselling teaching guides *Pimp Your Lesson!* and *Talk-Less Teaching*, and are both experienced classroom teachers, curriculum coordinators and school governors. They present nationally and internationally on teaching and learning, keeping the needs of both the busy teacher and the discerning learner at the heart of their training.

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