

## CHAPTER 2

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# Engagement as a Partnership

*"It's difficult. At the start, I thought, 'Right, I'm going to take you in this direction. It's going to be great, and you're going to achieve these standards that the principal is wanting.' And now I'm finding, oh no, we're not quite going to get there like I thought we were. I thought they'd get on board, and they'd be excited, and they'd be achieving, and then we'd build . . . but they're not wanting to put the work in or the effort in. They don't get as excited by success as I thought they might. It's a constant battle to try and engage them."*

—Teacher in her first year at a new school

In the previous chapter, we saw that engagement can be viewed as a battlefield, pitting teachers who have set the rules of engagement against students who choose not to play by those rules. While the balance of power is undeniably in favor of the teacher when it comes to planning what the students will be expected to do in a lesson, it is up to the students themselves to decide whether or not they will come to the party—and to what degree they will join the party or try and break it up. As we see in the quote above, our engagement and motivation as teachers can become collateral damage when we feel caught in the middle of pressure from above and resistance from below.

Mary Kennedy (2016) identified student engagement as one of five persistent and pervasive problems of practice faced by teachers. This problem stems from the fact that while we may be able to force students to turn up to school, we can't force them to learn once they are there. Students have three choices available to them in the face of this 'forced captivity'—active

engagement, active resistance, or passive compliance. She went on to argue that the challenge of trying to get all students actively engaged in every lesson is so great that teachers might opt to settle for a more realistic goal of passive compliance.

A truce, as it were, with no clear winners in terms of either engagement or learning.

Students walk into classes with enormous reserves of motivation—their interests, passions, capacity for curiosity, and their natural inclination to connect with others, to name a few—but many do not want to spend these resources on school learning. Our role, as teachers, is to turn these resources into fuel for learning so that students want to invest effort and energy into their work at school, and enjoy the success that comes from that effort. This is a major point of engagement. It is less about pushing and pulling into the direction we want them to go in, and more about making learning the pathway they want to be on. It is steering these rich resources to the tasks most likely to have them investing and driving toward success in lessons.

## AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL: ENGAGEMENT AS A PARTNERSHIP

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*“In many schools, students feel that education is something being done to them, often by adults who are not enjoying themselves. For students to be engaged, they need to feel known by the adults around them and that they have advocates working to help them succeed.”*

—Arthur Baraf, Principal of The Met High School (2019)

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Ideally, engagement should not be a contested space where one party wins at the expense of the other, nor a situation where both parties lose at the expense of both engagement and learning. The evidence is clear on the effectiveness of trying to force students to engage. When we try to control students and their engagement in learning activities, we might be successful in getting some students to a level of compliance, but this is a far cry from being highly invested and motivated to learn. Controlling approaches are often experienced as demotivating rather than motivating—not what we want if we are aiming for students to get to the *Driving* level of engagement.

There is an alternative, of course. If the goal is to see each student make progress and to support them to become highly motivated learners who have the skills and the will to drive their learning, then we need to remove the battle lines and join forces.

## Partnership(n.)

A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal

A misconception that I have come up against in my work with teachers is that the more active and engaged students become, the less active and engaged teachers become. If you've ever had the pleasure of observing a classroom where the students are highly engaged in what they are doing, you might be familiar with the real 'buzz' of energy and the productive hum as students share their ideas, celebrate sudden insights, and put their heads together to decide what to do next. In this situation, we teach less, and they learn more. You may also be familiar with the expert teacher who is equally engaged in the classroom discussions, called in by students to witness the latest achievement, and sought out to offer suggestions or feedback on where to go next. These teachers and their students are active partners in the learning process and both are highly engaged in what they are doing.

In a partnership, teachers and students come together to work towards a common goal, with both parties sharing the responsibility for engagement (and success). This is in contrast to more commonly held ideas that have the teacher pushing or pulling students in the direction the teacher wants them to go in, and the students either agreeing to go along with it or resisting these attempts. As partners in engagement, both teacher and student have important roles to play and bring valuable resources and skills to maximize engagement in learning.

As we create our foundation for engagement, one of the first things we can do is to identify whether we are on the path of battling over student engagement or on the path of partnering for engagement. Quite possibly, there are elements of both in

your classroom. Sometimes we praise and welcome those who are engaged and come up with explanations for why others are not. Sometimes we fall into a pattern with some students that feels like a constant battle, but with others, it feels like we are more in sync. It can also depend on the day and the activity. For example, some students might willingly participate in one subject but actively resist getting involved in another. This variability is one of the challenges of student engagement, as one teacher described it:

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

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Importantly, just because a student is *Participating* in the activity you have planned does not mean that they are motivated to learn. They may be passively complying to avoid conflict or simply because it is the easiest path for getting through the lesson. If we are aiming for higher levels of engagement—*Investing* and *Driving*—then students will need to be motivated enough to want to put in the effort needed to learn and skilled enough to take actions that will see them make progress in learning. It's at these higher levels that a partnership model will provide a more productive pathway for engagement.

Where there are signs of a partnership in place, then we can focus on building on those foundations. If, however, you find yourself in a situation where you are either facing a battle of wills over engagement or are coming up against a ceiling of passive compliance, then it may be time to re-imagine engagement and start to plot a different path forward.



## TIME TO REFLECT

Thinking about your experiences—as both a teacher and as a student—can you identify examples of the “battle” over engagement?

Have you had experiences—as both a teacher and as a student—of willing compliance that might be categorized as *Participating*? As a learner, have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you

were working with someone in a way that inspired you to become highly *Invested* in what you were learning or to want to *Drive* your learning even further?

Have you had any experiences as a teacher where you felt like you were in a collaborative partnership with students as they became highly *Invested* in learning and actively engaged in *Driving* their learning even further?

## WHAT CAN TEACHERS BRING TO THE ENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP?

In a partnership model, teachers play an integral role in supporting students to reach the level of engagement described in *Driving*. This includes: designing learning experiences that aim to optimize engagement, energizing students' inner motivational resources, supporting student autonomy and agency, making clear what it means to be successful so they can work with us to reach this success, making the learning appropriately challenging, collaborating with all students to optimize engagement, and cultivating a culture of engagement.

Let's look at these different aspects of supporting student engagement. We will continue to explore them in the chapters that follow.

## DESIGNING LEARNING EXPERIENCES THAT OPTIMIZE ENGAGEMENT

It may seem obvious, but if we are aiming for students to move along the continuum from *Participating* to *Driving* then we need to design learning experiences that require the level of effort described in *Driving*. For example, the task needs to be sufficiently challenging and open enough to justify conversations about improving or making progress towards a goal—not just getting the answers correct or finishing on time. In other words, the focus for *Driving* is on learning rather than doing (*Participating*). This does not mean that there isn't a place for activities that develop important foundational knowledge and skills, but it does mean that we do this with the intent of taking the learning and engagement deeper and becoming more challenging over time—and we share this intent with the students.

A killer of enhanced engagement is asking students to do more of the same when they have completed an activity. In his book *The Joy of Not Knowing*, Marcello Staricoff discusses the

motivational value of turning up the challenge once students have mastered a skill or concept, rather than assigning "more of the same" type tasks. He recounted an example of a Grade 5 class spending a week mastering the grid method for multiplication, then applying that method to tackle a HOTS (higher-order thinking skills) challenge where they had to estimate how much revenue a local bridge made in a year from people paying to cross. In this example, the students were able to participate in activities that asked them to practice the grid method, but then move beyond that to take on a challenge that had them collaborating with their peers towards a shared goal that required them to use the grid method over and over again as they tried to find an answer to a real-world problem.

When we are designing learning experiences, we do so with both engagement and learning in mind. This means we are considering the level of challenge, connecting learning experiences with the aim of moving from surface to deep, and building in opportunities for collaboration and social interaction within the learning experience as a key feature of *Investing and Driving*. We will look at this in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4 when we explore the differences in expectations for engagement as students take on increasing levels of challenge, and in Chapter 6 when we talk about engaging with peers to learn.

## **ENERGIZING STUDENTS' INNER MOTIVATIONAL RESOURCES**

Motivation researchers describe three basic psychological needs that provide the fundamental foundation and fuel for active engagement in learning and wellbeing in general. These are the need for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Each of these needs can be supported or thwarted at school, leading to feelings of either satisfaction or frustration. When our need for *autonomy* is met, we feel like we are able and willing to make meaningful choices and decisions, and are free to think, act and feel without being pressured or controlled by someone else. If this need is frustrated, we can feel in conflict, like we are being pushed or pulled in a direction we might not want to go in—as we have seen in the battle for engagement. Rather than trying to control student engagement, we aim to take an autonomy-supportive approach that enlists students as engagement partners and empowers them to make decisions and have a say about their engagement in learning. We will explore this in more detail shortly, but first, let's look at the need for *competence* and *relatedness*.

The need for *competence* is satisfied when we can effectively engage in opportunities that allow us to extend ourselves, experience success, and feel like we've mastered something. If this need is frustrated, we can feel like we are a failure or incapable of success. It is not hard to see why students who experience little or no success while at school might choose to disengage from activities and classroom learning experiences. After all, who wants to put their hand up for yet another opportunity to fail publicly while others around you are succeeding? Better to opt out altogether. Importantly, it is not about only ever doing things we know we can do well—this can get boring and doesn't provide us with the opportunity to develop resilience and strategies for dealing with setbacks and failures. Challenge can provide the fuel and motivation that we need to become actively engaged and driven to succeed. As teachers, it is important to identify the right amount of challenge—too little and it could be boring with limited chance to learn, too much and the student is unlikely to succeed or progress in their learning.

Finally, the need for *relatedness* is satisfied when we feel connected to and valued by others. When our need for relatedness is not met, we can experience feelings of being alienated, excluded, and lonely. Learning, particularly in the context of school, is a social activity, and relationships are at the core of student engagement. There is a large body of evidence showing that the teacher-student relationship, no matter what the age of the students, is associated with both engagement and achievement, and these relationships may be especially important for students who are academically at risk due to learning difficulties or socioeconomic disadvantage (Roorda et al., 2011).

Building positive relationships with our students may begin with showing that we care for them, that we are interested in them, that we listen and show we understand what we are hearing from them, and that we respect them, but being likable is not enough to improve student learning. There are other aspects to the relationship that we need to attend to as well, including the quality of our instruction and the structure and support that we provide to students as they learn. Our role is to demonstrate that we not only care about each student but we also believe in their potential to learn, have high expectations for them, and are there to provide the support and structure that will enable them to achieve success and make progress in their learning. In short, we need to become as engaged in the engagement partnership as the student is.

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*“Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school.”*

*(Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 270)*

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In addition to these basic psychological needs, students come equipped with other motivational resources that can fuel engagement. These include their interests, curiosity, and goals they have for themselves. These interests, goals, and capacity to be curious often need to be stretched by the teacher, communicating the message that we see excitement, curiosity, opportunities, and expectations in them above their own beliefs about themselves. So, our role is to build on existing interests AND develop new interests in things they may not have experienced or liked before, develop a culture of asking “Why” questions as these are the essence of curiosity, and show them that we have high expectations for their learning and believe in their ability to realize higher expectations of their learning than they previously thought possible. Our role is not to help them realize what they *think* is their potential but to offer them greater potential and show we can help them to realize that potential.

The interactions that we have with students and the learning activities that we design can either involve and energize students’ inner motivational resources or frustrate and demotivate them.

## **SUPPORTING STUDENT AUTONOMY AND AGENCY**

When students are operating at the *Driving* level of engagement, they are infused with a sense of autonomy and acting with agency. That is, they are feeling in control of their learning, know what to do when they do not know what to do, and are confident to take action in pursuit of the goals they have set for themselves. As teachers, we can support student autonomy and agency or act in ways that frustrate autonomy and inhibit agency.

### **WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?**

Johnmarshall Reeve has been studying student engagement and motivation for over two decades. He describes two approaches

teachers take to motivating and engaging students. At one end of the continuum is a highly autonomy-supportive style, and at the other end is a highly controlling style, with a range of different combinations in between. Essentially, highly controlling teachers operate in a way that says, “I am the boss. I will tell you what to do, what to think, and how to feel.” In contrast, the way that highly autonomy-supportive teachers interact with students says, “I am your ally. I am here to support you and help you reach your goals.”

The evidence on the impact of these two approaches is clear, students benefit from autonomy-support and suffer from being controlled. The benefits of an autonomy-supportive approach include improvements in motivation, engagement, learning, achievement, and wellbeing. In contrast, a controlling approach undermines student motivation, focuses on compliance rather than deeper engagement, and prevents students from realizing the benefits to learning and wellbeing that come from being highly motivated, acting with agency, and deeply engaged in classroom learning experiences (Reeve, 2009).

While we may not set out to be controlling, it remains that this type of motivating style is alive and well in K-12 classrooms. There are many reasons why a teacher might adopt this type of approach. For example, equating controlling strategies with being a competent teacher who is responsible for managing classroom activities and student behavior, and a misconception that autonomy-supportive strategies equate to ‘letting them do whatever they want.’ Sometimes teachers are pulled into a controlling style when faced with students who appear unmotivated, passive, or disengaged. A teacher’s beliefs about student motivation can also position them towards a more controlling style. For example, believing that offering rewards is a more effective strategy for getting students to engage than explaining the rationale behind the planned activity. (Reeve, 2009, 2016)

It is powerful and easier to be controlling if the goal is passive *Participating*. This entails surveillance, discipline, and making the work readily attainable (not stretching or challenging the students). What is fascinating is that some high-achieving students find much comfort in teachers controlling the learning for them. This is the game they are good at, get praise for, and like as the focus is simply on ‘doing’ what the teacher asks for. Some students dislike unstructured problems, wading into the learning pit of the unknown, and the uneasiness of the chaos of learning. They are compliance-junkies and while this may serve them well for some years, when they confront new domains, new challenges, and are asked to reach new heights they can falter. No wonder, most gifted students do not become

gifted adults. They are still at the “doing” stage and have not learned to move to the *Investing* and *Driving* stages of learning other than in their areas of expertise.

The autonomy-supportive approach sits at the heart of our engagement partnership, enabling students to move from *Participating* to *Driving*. While a controlling approach may pressure students into a level of compliance, this passive form of engagement lacks the inner motivational fuel that is needed to reach the *Investing* and *Driving* levels of engagement.

So how do we know if we are being autonomy-supportive or controlling? Reeve (2016) describes six different instructional behaviors that are associated with the autonomy-supportive approach and the opposing behavior that represents a controlling approach. They are:

#### Autonomy-Supportive

Taking the students’ perspective

Energizing students’ inner motivational resources (e.g., curiosity, interest, autonomy)

Explaining the value, benefit, or reason for requests, rules, procedures, and uninteresting activities

Using non-pressuring language

(e.g., offering choices)

Acknowledging and accepting negative responses or emotions

Displaying patience—allowing students to work at their own pace and in their own way

#### Controlling

Taking only the teacher’s perspective

Introducing extrinsic motivators (e.g., incentives, consequences)

Neglecting to provide an explanation or reason

Using controlling, pressuring language

Arguing with or trying to change negative reactions or emotions

Displaying impatience—rushing students to get it right, get it done quickly, taking over

In the following chapters, we will continue to revisit the concept of supporting student autonomy and agency as an important part of the role of the teacher.



## TIME TO REFLECT

While we may not set out to be intentionally controlling, chances are we've all acted in a controlling way at some time in the classroom. The first step to becoming more autonomy-supportive is to become aware of the ways that we are being controlling and try to reduce that. Then we can try to increase our autonomy-supportive behaviors. If we accept that we all might fall into controlling behavior from time to time, then one thing we can do is to identify the things that push or pull us towards this kind of approach. Perhaps it might be certain student behaviors that trigger us, for example, students that are demonstrating *Avoiding* type behaviors rather than engaging in a planned learning activity. For others, it might be the sense of pressure to get through the prescribed content or achieve certain outputs in the lesson. Or, it might be our own beliefs about the best way to motivate or engage students that sends us down the path of controlling rather than autonomy-support.

## CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

Operating at the *Driving* level is all about seeking out challenges, setting goals for improvement, and striving towards something. Unfortunately, this often runs counter to the existing norms and “rules of the game” at school. Many students have learned that being successful at school means getting the correct answer (and quickly!), getting things done, and getting things in on time. This type of culture rewards compliance and does not invite risk-taking, mistake-making, or challenge-seeking. Assuming students have the necessary ability and care enough about the game of school, success is achievable if they just do what the teacher asks of them. If this is the culture of the school that students are used to, then we may need to begin our engagement partnership by cultivating a new culture—one of engagement, embracing challenges, and striving to improve. Not all students will willingly embrace challenge or come equipped with the skills and motivation needed to successfully drive their own learning. Some children have had so few experiences of success in the classroom that they will want to actively avoid any challenge as yet another experience of not knowing or not being able to. Others might be used to winning at the game of school by getting things done quickly and getting things right with limited effort. These

students may resist our attempts to change the rules of the game on them as it means more effort for them and brings the possibility of mistakes and failure. In Chapter 7 we will look at building a culture of engagement where we celebrate mistakes and embrace challenge as we chase the thrill of success and progress after a period of struggle.



## TAKING IT INTO THE CLASSROOM

Wondering what your students think the culture of the school is? Why not ask them and find out? This can be a first step in inviting them to become partners in learning and engagement, as you look at learning from their perspective. Some questions you might ask are:

- What do good learners do?
- What does it mean to be a successful learner at school?
- What does it mean when you make a mistake or get things wrong? How does it make you feel?
- What helps you to learn at school?
- What makes it hard for you to learn?

You can do this as a class discussion or seek student input in more anonymous ways such as post-it notes.

You could also use an online tool such as Google Jamboard or Padlet to invite students to share their thoughts and feelings.

The responses you receive can give you a great insight into the existing culture in your classroom and help you to identify elements you can build on and grow, as well as things that might require a shift in thinking as we cultivate a culture that optimizes engagement.

Part of our culture means having a shared language for engagement, and a process for thinking about and talking about engagement in learning, providing the necessary structure and support students need to act with agency and a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The continuum of engagement presented in Chapter 1 provides teachers and students with a common language for discussing engagement, one that goes beyond simply engaged or disengaged. It gives us easily observed behaviors that are characteristic of the different forms of engagement, helping us to create intentions for engagement and criteria for monitoring engagement and describing different engagement pathways for learning. While some may believe that providing this kind of structure

is at odds with supporting student autonomy, this is a misconception. The evidence suggests that providing both structure and autonomy-support is the most effective pathway to the kind of active, self-regulated engagement described in *Driving*. Teachers can provide structure in an autonomy-supportive way by communicating clear expectations for engagement and learning, transparent criteria for success, and introducing clearly defined processes and procedures for engaging in learning. In the next chapter, we will look at a process for embedding engagement within the learning experience so that it becomes a part of our classroom learning culture—or “how we do things around here.” This process is a collaborative one, in the spirit of our engagement partnership, rather than something we do to students.

## COLLABORATING WITH ALL STUDENTS TO OPTIMIZE ENGAGEMENT

Another misconception about engagement is that teachers only have to support certain kids to engage—or, more accurately, help them to “do” the activity. And in particular, support those identified as “unmotivated” or at lower ability levels. By this deficit view, only some students need the help of the teacher and the rest can manage to get engaged and stay engaged without the help of the teacher. The problem with this type of thinking is it can go hand in hand with a view of engagement that sits at the *Participating* level and a controlling rather than autonomy-supporting approach. In other words, back to the battle for compliance rather than a partnership for engagement. In contrast, we are actively collaborating with *all* students to maximize their engagement and learning. That means, we seek their input and think about things from their perspective during planning and during learning, we seek feedback from them about their engagement and learning, and we develop a shared understanding of what engagement looks like and the different engagement pathways that lead to learning. Getting to know each of our students will help us to better understand their individual engagement patterns, the things that help them to engage, and the things that lead them to disengage.

This partnership for engagement extends beyond the teacher and student, allowing students to become engagement partners for each other as well. When we look at what students bring to the engagement partnership, we will see that they are active collaborators in this process, providing valuable inputs into their engagement and the engagement of others.

## WHAT CAN STUDENTS BRING TO THE ENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP?

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With all the talk of “hooking students in,” “getting students engaged,” and “keeping students engaged,” we might be forgiven for thinking that a student’s only role in engagement is to be pushed or pulled by the teacher in the direction the teacher wants them to go. Like a pawn in a game rather than a valued teammate. Thinking about student engagement in this way, it is the teacher who is responsible for thinking about engagement, deciding what constitutes “being engaged,” monitoring engagement, and stepping in to take control when students aren’t meeting the expectations for engagement. Not much of a partnership.

Reimagining the teacher’s role in student engagement is one piece of the puzzle, but we also need to consider the implications for students and what can be expected of them in this new approach. After all, if we are going to share the responsibility for engagement then everyone needs to know what that involves. So, what can students bring to the engagement partnership?

## INVESTING MOTIVATION AND EFFORT

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We’ve already discussed the rich inner motivational resources that students bring into the classroom, these are the fuel for engagement in learning should the student decide to invest them. They include feelings of having autonomy over their learning, feeling competent and able to achieve success, feeling connected and valued by those within the learning environment, feeling interested or curious about what is being learned, and having a sense that the learning is personally meaningful or valuable. Along with motivation to learn, students also bring the effort that is needed to make progress and improve. How much effort they invest will depend on their motivation and the task itself. When the inner motivation is not sufficiently energized, it will be hard to move beyond a state of passive, compliant *Participation*. If the challenge level of the task is too low, it will be easy for students to take the strategic path and “coast” with limited effort, or choose to disengage because it is too boring. If the challenge is too great, students may opt out rather than risking embarrassment and frustration, and wasting effort on something unlikely to lead to success.

In short, students contribute to the engagement partnership by choosing to invest their motivational resources and effort as they strive to make progress in their learning.

## TAKING AGENCY OVER ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

Students' input into the engagement partnership goes beyond deciding if they will engage and to what extent. Students are also capable of actively influencing the learning environment to benefit both their motivation and learning. They do this by proactively communicating their interests, needs, and preferences for learning, taking steps to seek support and make progress in their learning and working in collaboration with others in ways that benefit their motivation and learning (Reeve, Cheong, & Jang, 2020). If you think this sounds a lot like the *Driving* form of engagement, you're right!

### COMMUNICATING

When students take agency by communicating their needs, interests, and preferences, teachers tend to respond in increasingly autonomy-supportive ways (Matos, Reeve, Herrera, & Claux, 2018). That is when students proactively share what they are interested in learning, how they prefer to learn, and the things that they need to progress in their learning, teachers are more inclined to listen to their ideas, provide choices and options for students, encourage them to ask questions and communicate about their learning, and show confidence in the student's ability to succeed. We have already seen that an autonomy-supportive approach is beneficial to student engagement, but this is not a one-way street from teacher to student. It seems that students who demonstrate and communicate active engagement in what they are learning can influence the teacher to be increasingly supportive of their autonomy—which in turn will continue to energize student motivation and engagement.

### SNAPSHOT OF PRACTICE

One of the teachers I interviewed, Nicole, explained this beautifully. The teaching team had planned an inquiry unit focusing on social justice that was meant to go for one term but ended up being extended based on the engagement of the students:

*"We only planned the inquiry to go for a term but we ended up taking it over two terms because it just took on a life of its own. The kids were asking questions and wanting to research different community organizations. They wanted to take it further. They said, 'We can actually do something to make a difference and get out there.' So, we decided to carry it over and took it into Term 3. They chose the organization they wanted to research, figured*



*out how they could help, and worked together as teams to pull it off. They'd come in first thing in the morning talking about it, asking when they were going to get time to plan. I got really excited about it too, and invested in what they were doing."*

By communicating their interest in taking the planned inquiry unit further, and asking for things they needed to progress—like time to plan and space to meet with their groups—these students were able to influence the teacher's plans and create a learning experience that was highly motivating and extended their understanding of the concept of social justice and their place in the community.

### TAKING ACTION TO LEARN

The students in Nicole's class did more than just communicate their needs, ideas, and interests to her, they were also taking action and steps to help them move forward. They identified meaningful goals for extending their learning, made plans for reaching those goals, asked questions and looked for the answers using the research skills they had been taught, and reflected on their discoveries and plans along the way. Far from just waiting to be told what to do, these students were taking their learning into their own hands. When students are taking action to learn, they understand what they are trying to achieve, have a path in mind to get them to that goal, and seek support along the way when needed. These behaviors are indicative of students being in *Driving* mode and include several strategies that have the potential to considerably accelerate student achievement according to Visible Learning Meta<sup>x</sup> ([www.visiblelearningmetax.com](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com)). For example, help-seeking, self-judgment and reflection, self-directed learning, and effort management. A key to taking action is having the right strategies and being able to use them effectively to make progress. To keep the internal flames of motivation going, students need to feel like they are entrusted to make decisions about their learning (including the decision to seek help from others when needed), but also confident that they are capable of achieving success and making progress when doing so.

### COLLABORATING WITH OTHERS

One action a student can take to benefit both their engagement and learning is to collaborate with others. When students choose to collaborate with the teacher or with their peers, they are actively seeking a partner who will help them manage their motivation, engagement, and learning. This might include seeking feedback on their ideas or input on where to go next:

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*“They were seeking extension for themselves, seeking challenges, you know coming up to me asking, ‘What can I do next?’ or ‘Would this be a good route to take?’ and ‘What do you think about this question? Do you think this would be a good idea?’”*

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The collaboration extends beyond help-seeking though. At times, students share their discoveries, expertise, and insights—often to the benefit of the teacher’s own engagement:

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*“I really enjoy having the kids come up to me so excited to explain what they’ve done or something they’ve just discovered—it’s often so much better than I expected. I love learning new things from them. It’s like we’re switching roles and they are the experts. Especially with some of my kids who really struggle and then they’re able to be an expert on something and they’re teaching someone something new. It’s fantastic!”*

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Of course, students also have peers they can collaborate with. At the *Investing* level, students are eager to share their ideas and thinking with peers. They might also decide to pair up with others who have similar interests during an activity. At the *Driving* level, students are actively collaborating with others toward a shared goal and challenging each other to drive improvement and progress.

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*“I think the questioning is a big thing. If I hear kids questioning each other and, you know, debating issues and sharing opinions and that sort of thing, that’s a higher level of engagement. It’s not just a passive listening to somebody and then taking my turn to say what I think. It’s actually adding to what they’ve said, and challenging what’s been said. ‘Yes, and what about this?’ or ‘Have you considered this?’”*

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## LET’S GET THIS PARTNERSHIP STARTED!

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As we enter into the engagement partnership, each party must understand what is expected of them. To briefly summarize what each can contribute to student engagement:

### Teachers Can:

- Design learning experiences that optimize engagement
- Energizing students’ inner motivational resources

### Students Can:

- Invest their motivation and effort into learning
- Communicate their interests, ideas, preferences, and needs

- Support student autonomy and agency
- Cultivate a culture of engagement
- Collaborating with all students to optimize engagement
- Take action to engage in learning and make progress
- Collaborate to benefit engagement and learning

We could just put this up on the board and tell students, “This is what you have to do,” but that would be at odds with all that we’ve learned in this chapter. In the spirit of autonomy-support and seeking the active input of our partners, you might like to do as Nicole did with her Grade 5 and 6 students. Before our interview, she was reflecting on her thinking about student engagement and found she was interested in hearing what the students had to say about it. She wanted to find out how their perspective compared to her own, but also as a way of getting feedback on their engagement and her teaching. The students ran the discussion themselves, recording the responses on a T-chart with “What engages us” on one side and “What disengages us” on the other. Nicole found the responses to be very insightful and helped her to understand her students’ perspectives on their engagement. Some of the comments that came out of the discussion include:

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*“Working with people you wouldn’t normally work with because when I work with my friends it’s a lot easier to be distracted, so I’m not as engaged. When I have to work with someone else, I’m really listening to what they’re saying because I’m not used to who they are and how they work.”*

*“How you introduce the lesson. I’ll be either engaged from the beginning or I’ll have to work to stay engaged.”*

*“Let me try it first before you come and help. I become disengaged if I find out the answer too quickly.”*

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Try it with your students, it can give you an insight into their perspective and they might surprise you with what they have to say!