

# **Engaging the Challenging, Disengaged and Underachieving Students**

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What organisational changes need to be made to enhance educational delivery for students in Intermediate/Middle Schools who are challenging, disengaged and underachieving?

## **Purpose**

The purpose of my sabbatical was to gain a greater understanding of evidence based, effective ways to engage students in learning, particularly those who are under achieving and/or presenting with behavioural issues.

Specifically I wanted to use the information gained from reading research and school visits, to provide leadership and guidance in bringing about change and further development of our school culture.

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank the Board of Trustees of Oamaru Intermediate School approving and supporting my sabbatical leave. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to travel and visit a number of schools as I explored the issue of re-engaging students.

My thanks extend to my staff and particularly the Senior Management who all took on extra responsibilities during my absence.

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Finally, I wish to thank the NZ Teachers Council for granting me sabbatical leave which has proved to be a time of refreshment, and renewed focus for direction as a Principal.

## **Background**

I believe that Oamaru Intermediate is and has been a school that offers motivating and engaging programmes in a positive environment. The school is inclusive and has sound pastoral care practices in place.

Research has suggested that the drop off in student engagement at school increases during the middle years becoming more noticeable among 13-14 year old students. From my perspective as an Intermediate school principal there seems to be an increasing number of students enrolling at our school who are disengaged from learning. The reasons for disengagement are varied and some of the reasons are not particularly obvious. Of concern are the number of students who have "written themselves off" as a learner. I fear that the current practice of 'Reporting against National Standards' has the potential to increase the numbers of students who see themselves as failures with little hope of achieving academically, and as a result will disengage at the Year 7/8 level or younger.

As an Intermediate we have two years in which to influence these behaviours and attitudes and instil a positivity towards learning.

At O.I.S we have provided additional hands on learning opportunities for small groups within the school and local community. These have included landscaping, developing vegetable gardens, building a hen house, building and installing penguin boxes, helping out at the community gardens and cooking for a community church freezer.

These programmes require staffing and resourcing. Anecdotally they were successful in that those involved were very positive about the programmes, attendance and behaviours improved. Parents spoke positively about their child's enthusiasm and change of attitude towards school.

I was keen to see what structures were in place and what programmes were happening in other schools and to develop a tool to critically evaluate the impact of these i.e. change of attitude at school, engagement in the classroom, progress and achievement.

## **Definition**

In order to stem the tide of disengagement I needed to clarify engagement in order to focus my inquiry.

Fredericks, Blumfield, & Paris (2004) stress that the concept of engagement as applied to schooling is defined in three ways in the research literature:

*Behavioural engagement draws on the idea of participation: it includes involvement in academic and social or extra-curricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropout.*

*Emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influences willingness to do the work.*

*Cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills.*

The definition offered by Gibbs and Poskitt (2010, p10) is comprehensive and notes potential teacher impact.

*Engagement is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, teachers and peers; their sense of agency, self-efficacy and orientation to achieve within their classrooms and in their broader extra-curricular endeavours' their involvement, effort, levels of concentration and interest in subjects and learning in general' and the extent to which learning is enjoyed for its own sake, or seen as something that must be endured to receive a reward or avoid sanction. Further, engagement is a variable state of being that is*

*influenced by a range of internal and external factors including the perceived value or relevance of the learning and the presence of opportunities for students to experience appropriately-pitched challenge and success in their learning. **As such engagement is malleable by the actions of teachers.***

In their literature review Gibbs and Poskitt (2010, p11) also note

*students need to be present in class (behaviourally engaged), and experience a degree of emotional comfort and connectedness (emotionally engaged), before they can become cognitively engaged. In essence, behavioural and emotional engagement, are preconditions of cognitive engagement.*

It is these three dimensions of engagement; behavioural, emotional and cognitive, and what schools were doing to actively engage students, that became the focus of my visits to schools.

### **Schools visited**

I visited a total of 12 schools and one American Summer Camp Organisation. Each of these establishments catered for Year 7 and 8 students but in a variety of contexts.

Wildflower Open School in Chico (USA) was a newly established Charter School offering an alternative to the public system. Overton Grange and Stanley Park are English High Schools in the greater London area. Gillingham and Shaftesbury are English High Schools based in rural towns in Dorset. In Melbourne I visited Bayside College spread over 3 campuses and Carey Baptist Grammar School. Both schools catered specifically for a middle school focus. Belmont, Farm Cove and Northcross are all Auckland Intermediate schools much larger than Oamaru Intermediate.

School visits were all different ranging from spending a full day in class observations, meeting with Principals, key staff and students, to joining in a multi-agency welfare meeting, discussing significant concerns relating to individuals re. their presence and engagement.

In each school, where possible, I spoke with students about their sense of belonging, their involvement and success.

I discussed with Senior Management how their school went about developing connections with students enrolling at Year 7 and what opportunities they provided in their school for engagement outside of the classroom.

I spoke with ESOL teachers of ways in which they developed relationships and built confidence in their learners.

Many classroom teachers shared with me aspects of their programmes which they had consciously developed to raise student engagement.

## Findings

Most schools visited placed importance on transitioning students into their school. This was done in a variety of ways depending on whether the school was zoned with natural feeder schools, whether it relied on marketing or had a selected enrolment process.

For some schools significant effort was put into transition prior to students arriving. For others the major focus was when students started at the school.

Schools followed up enrolment at the start of their new year with a variety of ways in which they set about building connections and developing a sense of identity with their students. These actions typically involved students becoming part of house systems and vertical tutor groups. Students were encouraged to join sports teams, culture groups or other clubs within the school.

One school was a new build in a new subdivision and was challenged with building a school identity and culture from scratch, not just engaging new students with an established identity and traditions. Listening to student voice was particularly important as they reviewed and modified their practices.

Several schools shared their pastoral care systems with me. They had processes in place whereby disengaged students were identified, supported and monitored at varying levels by lead teachers, deans or senior management. The majority of those being monitored were as a result of behavioural issues arising due to their disengagement. There was a high level of data gathering and analysis around achievement, particularly in the English schools, and students were identified for further attention through this avenue.

One school used an "Attitude to Learning" rubric which appealed to me. This rubric was focussed on developing a positive behaviour to learning independent of the capabilities of each child. The rubric described student behaviour under the headings; Preparation, Focus on Task, Contribution. The descriptors were divided into 5 levels; Unsatisfactory, Inconsistent, Coasting, Very Good, Excellent. The rubric was used as a self-assessment tool, a platform for pupil/teacher discussion, and a basis for goal setting. It also served to articulate a level of consistency in expectation across the school. By replacing the often used "Satisfactory" with "Coasting" the school was indicating that Very Good or Excellent was their expectation.

Another school ran specific 6 week programmes to re-engage selected students. They had discovered that for them 6 weeks was generally the time needed to bring about desired changes in behaviours. Some students continued for a further 6 weeks.

Student-centred Learning in Action and Creating Motivating Classrooms were the underlying principles in teacher focus and development in one school. This was explicit with expectations linked to teachers' goal setting and reflective practice.

Increasing ready access to a wide range of Information and Communication Technology was seen as a key way of increasing student engagement by both pupils and schools. No school

felt they had optimum access and all were faced with hurdles including infrastructure and finance.

My visits to each of the New Zealand Intermediates had specific aspects I was keen to see and discuss with teachers and students.

Northcross Intermediate provided a range of class choices for Year 8 pupils where learning was based in varying contexts e.g. sports classes, a performing arts class, inquiry class, e-learning and digital classes. Students I spoke with valued these opportunities. This is not something I could replicate in a school of our size but providing for a level of self-determination within learning is a challenge to be taken up.

Northcross and Belmont were both schools who used KnowledgeNet and as a new adopter of this LMS, I was keen to see what they were doing to engage students (and families) in learning.

I appreciated discussions regarding the journeys schools had taken as they introduced BYOD to their classrooms and the impact this had on student engagement.

Farmcove provided me with a wonderful opportunity to see teaching and learning in open shared spaces. Having the opportunity to discuss practicalities and philosophy around learning in this environment and to observe classes in action was also valuable as I was about to head back to a newly completed MLE block with variable learning spaces.

Typical responses from students to the questions, "Is this a good school? What makes it a good school?" were;

- Teachers who cared about them
- Teachers who made learning interesting
- Students valued hands on experiences such as technology classes and field trips.
- Having choice in what they did.
- NZ and Australian students also said learning needed to be fun to keep them engaged.

These schools had many differing approaches and many similarities but at the heart of each school was a clear expectation of achievement for their students, and a number of systems in place to promote engagement.

Having had time to reflect on my return to school, there are aspects of our school set up which have been confirmed and some aspects to be developed.

## **Summary**

Based on the definition of Gibbs & Poskitt, (2010) already referred to, the engagement of students is malleable by the actions of teachers. Emotional and behavioural engagement are pre-conditions for cognitive engagement.

If we accept that teachers who nurture relationships can provide an environment whereby students have a sense of belonging, a place where they feel connected. As such, the ground work is laid to enable a positive self-perception to develop and a pathway to achieve.

Teachers who take time to plan activities that interest their learners, require involvement and provide success have a direct influence on the students' enjoyment of learning.

Programmes which are relevant, challenging and provide choice and appropriate levels of support will engage students more deeply in their learning.

Therefore teachers who plan and deliver programmes are a major factor influencing the engagement of their students, and as such, not only have the ability but a professional responsibility to interact, plan and teach with an explicit focus on engaging their pupils.

As a leader in the school I believe it is my responsibility to develop a culture in which;

- positive respectful relationships are paramount
- encourage programmes which are relevant and responsive rather than restricted and narrowed
- promote professional discussion and learning around aspects of engagement
- facilitate support from external agencies
- facilitate positive transition
- ensure that students experience fun, challenge and success within their classrooms
- monitor levels of engagement
- work with the Board to staff and resource aspects which promote re-engagement
- be explicit about expectations and our vision for learning
- provide support for students and teachers

### **Implications**

Having completed my sabbatical the challenge for me is to bring together my learnings from this experience and articulate strategies that will be implemented at Oamaru Intermediate, deliberately focused on providing leadership and structure which will facilitate student engagement. The following strategies and practices (many of which are in place), will be implemented with a focus on engaging students.

#### Initially

Significant emphasis will be placed on building a sense of belonging.

- A comprehensive transition programme in place for Year 6 pupils
- Visits to contributing schools by Principal and Year 7 team leader
- Meet students, answer questions, provide reassurance
- Open Night for parents and prospective students involving all staff
- Orientation Morning for all Year 6 students enrolling
- Additional visits for small groups of children with concerns/anxieties
- Interviews with Year 6 teachers regarding each student

Class programmes actively focus on building relationships.

- Getting to know you activities in the first few days

- Developing trust and treaties
- 2 day outdoor programme with overnight stay camping at school
- Families from each class share BBQ tea and meet each other
- Year 7 classes are timetabled for technology first, providing hands on experiences

Students are placed in Houses.

- First event – swimming sports. Competitive inter-house sports with a real fun element

Year 8 focus – building/strengthening relationships

- All students focus on development of relationships with new class
- New students monitored/supported

A significant range of opportunities are available for involvement.

- Sport
- Service
- Cultural
- Musical
- Clubs
- Leadership

Teachers actively build relationships with students and parents.

- Identify students who are anxious, unsettled, disengaged.
- Create regular contact with another adult for those who are struggling to engage

#### Ongoing Emphasis

A clearly articulated Pastoral Care System is in place.

- Identifying responsibilities
- Referral procedures
- Consistency of student management
- Communication – students/parents/agencies

Engaging programmes are planned providing for;

- Fun, challenge and success
- Opportunity for goal setting and ownership
- Co-operative and self-directed learning
- Relevance and variety
- Self-assessment and self-reflection
- Specific feedback
- Hands on experiences
- Ready access to ICT devices to support learning

Development of a student engagement profile used;

- To identify students
- To discuss engagement with students (student voice)
- To assist students to be self- reflective and focussed



### Monitoring

- Progress on engagement profile
- Pastoral Care
- Interventions/programmes/agencies

### Critical Friends/Mentoring/Teaching as Inquiry

- Includes focus/feedback on engagement of students
- Links made to P.M.S and R.T.C.
- Successful strategies/activities/progress shared

### Final Reflection

**“In the end the path to student engagement starts where young people are and helps them to chart a course that will take them where they need to go.**

**Engagement is a habit of mind and heart.**

**To engage young people requires of us what we ask of them:  
full commitment  
a belief that it is possible and a  
vision of a viable and productive future.”**

(Joselowsky, 2007, p. 273)

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