

The school I currently work for has a reputation as a place that is innovative, creative and student focused. We have done remarkable work in relational practice and student centred approaches. However, like many schools we have a problem with getting a certain cohort to engage as we would like. While there will always be factors outside of our control, I was interested in identifying factors that we can control.

The focus of my sabbatical was to investigate best practice when it comes to creating a culture of engagement. As well as attending professional development and undertaking professional reading I spent time at a variety of schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom sought to understand if/how they are generating a culture that inspires students to work to the limit of their potential. I was also particularly interested in how this culture impacts on student wellbeing.

I was able to spend time in 9 different schools as well as meeting with researchers from NZCER and educators at Victoria University and the University of London. The conversations with schools were frank and honest. After considering the information I had gathered (and the requests by some for the school not to be identified) I decided not to name the schools out of respect for the senior leaders who shared with me their honest reflections. Instead I have identified the school by decile rating and any notable descriptor (e.g. High decile urban co-ed)

The resulting report reads like a narrative of my experiences, reflections and learning over the last term. I have been honest in my reflection and I have decided not to edit too much to retain a sense of my own journey. In many ways, the audience of this report is myself and I will use the learning I have done to frame up conversations and new lines of inquiry as I return to school.

If I am honest, the time I have had on sabbatical time has been challenging. It has made me consider the breadth of the task at hand for educators and how important it is to find ways to make the job sustainable for professionals committed to the young people we serve. As a senior leader, I have much to wrestle with from my learning and I am committed to finding ways to make a sustainable and meaningful changes to engage staff and students in the opportunity schooling provides us all.

The sabbatical has been of enormous benefit to me. I was looking for fresh inspiration and time to refine my thinking about how to best broach the question of engagement in the senior school. I have been inspired by others and begun to generate new ideas and aspirations. I have brought new learning back to the team with a revitalised energy for our mission. The learning I have done will directly supported our strategic plan and I now have new ideas to bring to the table about how we could effectively address the challenges of student engagement.

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# 1. What is Engagement?

John Douglas Willms writes that students ‘...are more likely to be engaged at school if they attend schools that have a high average socio-economic status, a strong disciplinary climate, good student-teacher relations and high expectations for student success.’<sup>1</sup> However, one of the challenges of asking questions about engagement in education is trying to define exactly what we mean by engagement.

One perspective is offered in the piece “Supporting Student Engagement” where the writer states:

*‘Engagement’ at school can mean many things, ranging from a student choosing to attend school rather than truant, to a situation where students remain on-task or ‘engaged’ throughout an activity or task because they find it to be ‘fun’ (but where learning of key concepts from the task may or may not be realised). It can also refer to a learning situation involving deeper level cognitive engagement, in which the students actively problem-solve, think more broadly than the immediate topic, and can make insightful links to other learning areas.*<sup>2</sup>

In the article ‘*Engagement in Australian Schools*’ prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership the writer states that, “Engagement is an ambiguous term; poorly defined and difficult to measure. Engagement is not simply about good classroom behaviour or attendance, but a connection with learning. The student who is quietly sitting at the back of the classroom not participating in discussions or completing their work is as disengaged as a child who is talking with friends or the child who did not show up at school.”<sup>3</sup> To help unpack different lenses on engagement a framework is proposed that distinguishes between cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement.<sup>4</sup>

This framework is useful as otherwise it can be difficult to hone in on the core issues different educators are attempting to wrestle with when discussing engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Willms, J.D. *Student Engagement At School A Sense Of Belonging And Participation Results From Pisa 2000* retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/33689437.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Factors that influence student engagement. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Middle-schooling/Engagement> retrieved 25 July 2018

<sup>3</sup> *Engagement in Australian schools*, A paper prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2014) retrieved from [http://www.centralrangeslln.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement\\_in\\_Australian\\_Schools-Background\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.centralrangeslln.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement_in_Australian_Schools-Background_Paper.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Fredericks, Friedel J, J.A., Blumenfield, P.C. and Paris, A.H. (2003) *School Engagement* retrieved from [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Child\\_Trends-2003\\_03\\_12\\_PD\\_PDConfFBFP.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Child_Trends-2003_03_12_PD_PDConfFBFP.pdf)

## Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is the most difficult to measure or observe. Essentially this is a 'students psychological investment in their own learning'<sup>5</sup> **and it must not be mistaken for high academic performance.** Indicators of students who demonstrate cognitive engagement can be:

- a focus on achieving goals
- flexibility in their work and the ability to adapt
- the ability to cope with failure

## Behavioural engagement

Behavioural engagement tends to be reported on most readily and is founded on 'a student's participation in learning and classroom activities'.<sup>6</sup> It was noted that reporting on behavioural engagement can often focus on identifying poor behaviour rather than celebrating positives.

Indicators of students demonstrating behavioural engagement can be:

- adhering to school rules
- attendance
- punctuality
- collaboration
- communication
- participation in the wider life of the school



These indicators were also seen to connect to high academic performance

## Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement is underpinned by the 'relationships between students, teachers, classmates and the school'. It is also defined by a student's identification with the school and its learning practices.

The indicators of emotional engagement are:

- the student feels included
- the student has an emotional bond with the school, teachers and peers

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<sup>5</sup> *Engagement in Australian schools*, A paper prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2014) retrieved from [http://www.centralrangesllen.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement\\_in\\_Australian\\_Schools-Background\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.centralrangesllen.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement_in_Australian_Schools-Background_Paper.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

All three of these facets of engagement are important and are hard to distinguish. Therefore it is quite hard to measure how successful interventions have been.

I found the concept of 'emotional' engagement very interesting as it taps into a wider discussion about the role of schools in establishing community and a sense of purpose and belonging for students.

For some time now I have been considering the role that schools are playing not only places of learning, but increasingly as the hub of community engagement and social cohesion. It seems to me that schools are now playing a bigger role than ever in navigating and articulating the common values of a society that is concurrently more connected and also dislocated. It seems that schools are now charged with the role of protecting the traditions and knowledge of the past as well as preparing students for a future that is hinted at in almost dystopian tones.

Schools are struck by a need to innovate and develop in ways that will ensure student engagement and participation. The onus is on school's to deliver rich programmes that will engage young people and prepare them for the uncertain future.

Schools are being asked to engage students cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally.

The question of how purpose/meaning, belonging and engagement interface in schools is one that became an ongoing theme in many of the discussions I have had during the sabbatical.

## **2. Strengthening Student Engagement (Strong, Silver, Robinson)**

The article '*Strengthening Student Engagement: What do Students Want (and what really motivates them)?*' argues that students are ultimately energized by four distinct goals. These goals were summarized as the want and need for success, curiosity, originality and relationship.<sup>7</sup> Their research was conducted over 10 years and involved both students and teachers. They concluded from the research that the four goals above were clear patterns that expressed what drove people who were engaged in their work at school. A theme that runs through all four goals is the idea that people are engaged in work that satisfies a human need. For example:

- The need for mastery (success)

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<sup>7</sup> Strong R, Silver H & Robinson A, '*Strengthening Student Engagement: What do Students Want (and what really motivates them)?*' 1995 retrieved from [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)

- The need for understanding (curiosity)
- The need for self expression (originality)
- The need for meaningful involvement with others (relationship)

This conclusion challenges schools to consider what indicators they are looking for when considering engagement. It asks teachers to reflect on what cues they are looking for in a classroom setting and design learning experiences that will create opportunity for different types of engagement as appropriate.

Suggested approaches:<sup>8</sup>

<b>Success</b>
<p>Students want and need work that enables them to demonstrate and improve their sense of themselves as competent and successful human beings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Skills must be explicitly modeled and taught. This is not something students will just chance upon.</li> <li>● Feedback must be clear, timely and constructive</li> <li>● We must broaden our definition of success</li> <li>● Students need to know when they have done a good job and how to improve</li> </ul>
<b>Curiosity</b>
<p>Students want and need work that stimulates their curiosity and awakens their desire for deep understanding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We need to instill mystery into our programmes</li> <li>● We need to make information about a topic fragmentary or contradictory (this compels students to understand it further or investigate)</li> <li>● We need to connect topics to students lives</li> </ul> <p>Example:</p> <p>Adolescent issue = Independence</p> <p>Topic = Revolutions</p> <p>Connection = When is rebellion justified?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We need to 'problematise' the learning</li> </ul>
<b>Originality</b>
<p>Students want and need work that permits them to express originality, autonomy and discover who they are and who they want to be.</p>

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<sup>8</sup> ibid

Schools unintentionally stifle creativity by focusing on it. This is because we often focus on technique rather than expression. This in turn leads to only the 'most talented' being celebrated cutting off others from a sense of purpose. Additionally, schools often mistake creativity for play and can fail to maintain the high standard and sense of seriousness that makes creative work meaningful.

- Connect creative projects to ideas and concerns
- Expand what counts as an audience
- Give choice
- Encourage abstraction

### **Relationship**

Students want and need work that will enhance relationship with people they care about. This is about a sense of necessity and belonging as much as a shared purpose.

- Students will work where relationships are reciprocal (what you have to offer is of value and visa versa)
- This is the pervasive drive in all our lives
- Unbalanced, nonreciprocal relationships will not engage energy or interest.

It is interesting that of these four, success is the one most directly related to how schools usually measure progress, and more often than not success is defined as achievement. I am not sure if this is the same thing. It is also clear that running through all of this is the question of human need. The NZ Curriculum states:

*“Students learn best when they feel accepted, when they enjoy positive relationships with their fellow students and teachers, and when they are able to be active, visible members of the learning community. Effective teachers foster positive relationships within environments that are caring, inclusive, non-discriminatory and cohesive.”<sup>9</sup>*

Perhaps this is the most important message when wrestling with student engagement. If learning happens best when the fundamental relationships are positive and effective, we need to change the narrative of how we measure success in education. The fundamental dispositions needed for student engagement grow out of meaningful and authentic relationship and recognition that your contribution is valued and necessary.

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<sup>9</sup> The New Zealand Curriculum. (n.d.). Retrieved July 31, 2018, from <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum#collapsible10>

This kind of thinking is reflected in the work done by Bishop and Berryman on culturally responsive practices and the Te Kohitanga effective teaching profile. In the publication 'Teaching for Positive Behaviour'<sup>10</sup>, Tracy Rohan summarises this profile and notes that 'caring for students as culturally located human beings above all else' is an essential aspect.

This supports the idea that for students to be engaged, 'emotional engagement' will be the key to 'behavioural engagement' and hopefully lead to 'cognitive engagement'.

### **3. Conversations with NZCER**

I was incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to meet with researchers at NZCER who were generous in their time and support of my inquiry. We discussed examples of successful interventions in schools they had worked with that have successfully addressed student engagement.

In our conversation we discussed how engagement was a disposition that supported students to achieve academic results. However, the key competencies of the curriculum promote engagement as goals in themselves and need to be focused on and recognised as valued outcomes.

In particular, Sally Boyd was incredibly generous and had prepared for me a collection of observations based on her work. Her summary suggested the following approaches were key to addressing the 'cognitive and affective aspects of engagement'. Her observations aligned closely with the themes emerging from my reading and conversations with school leaders.

- Foster belonging and connection to school, teachers and peers
  - o *Build stronger teacher and student relationships*
  - o *Get students involved in extra curricular*
  - o *Promote and value culture*

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<sup>10</sup> Rohan, T. (2017). *Teaching for Positive Behaviour* (pp. 6-8) (New Zealand, Ministry of Education). Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

- Address students' social and emotional wellbeing needs
  - o *Offer comprehensive health and wellbeing services*
  - o *Address unmet needs (e.g. boys who don't have male role models)*
  - o *Acknowledged and celebrate a wide range of actions...not just achievement*
- Identify and meet learning needs
  - o *Design relevant curriculum and use pedagogy that promotes engagement*
  - o *Get to know students and design learning in a way that relates to them*
- Foster students' competencies and agency
  - o *Build a team work ethic in the class*
  - o *Create leadership opportunity*
- Manage behavior effectively and fairly
  - o *Make sure discipline systems are fair and build competency*
  - o *Give students learn how to repair relationship*
- Make use of data and team work
  - o *Design approaches **for** students*
  - o *Use data to identify the risks*
  - o *Seek student input and feedback*
  - o *Use data to test effectiveness of interventions.*

Sally pointed out one particularly interesting review that used a 'spider web analogy'. This international review examined 133 studies that focused on the role of relationships in schools and their impact on mental health and academic learning. The authors concluded there is a complex "spider web" of interconnections between relationships, belonging, engagement and wellbeing. They argue that greater pedagogical attention be paid to this spider web. The first step is to identify each aspect and how they interplay and plan to address each explicitly.<sup>11</sup>

Also of note were the findings from the Youth 2007 study. The conclusion here was that schools that foster belonging and engagement were a protective factor for students with 'low level' behavioural or emotional challenges. However, students with higher-level emotional and behavioural challenges were likely to truant/disengage regardless of the environment and so needed to be screened for targeted assistance and

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<sup>11</sup> McLaughlin, C., & Clarke, B. (2010) Relational Matters: A review of the impact of school experience on mental health in early adolescence. Educational & Child Psychology, 27(1), 91-103

potential mental health service support.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Reflection

The challenge here is that much of this work is outside the training and preparedness of teachers who often come to the profession as senior subject specialists. For many teachers, the job they find themselves actually doing can bear little resemblance to what they were originally trained for. This is particularly the case when it comes to staff moving into areas of responsibility. The expectation on school leaders to understand and manage that complexity can be overwhelming. For example, managing student wellbeing and mental health is increasingly a core part of our work. If wellbeing is a critical feature of student engagement, it seems that schools increasingly need to create spaces in their timetable and curriculum to accommodate this. This is a complex and at times sensitive task that has implications for teacher training, professional development and structures to support staff managing high-risk caseloads.

### Where to target?

In our schools there appears to be a tendency to equate disengagement with poor behavior and miss the quietly disengaged. This means schools need to think carefully about how to 'innovate for the middle'. Most schools have interventions for at risk or gifted and talented students. However, the energy spent here can sometimes come at the cost of generating a genuinely engaging experience for the quiet majority.

The consequences of disengagement for students is hard to measure as often 'disengaged students' can still produce positive results academically. But there appears to be some correlation between engagement and positive outcomes outside of schools. Emotional engagement as defined above is associated with students continuing to study and learn after leaving school.

Curating an environment where a culture of engagement and wellbeing exists is a strong foundation for a future success. The question then is what to target first to generate this kind of culture? Behavioural, emotional or cognitive engagement?

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<sup>12</sup> Denny, S., Galbreath, R., Grant, S., & Milfont, T. (2010) Youth '07: The health and wellbeing of secondary school students in New Zealand, Students who truant: What makes a difference? Auckland: The University of Auckland.

In the article *'Engagement in Australian Schools'* the writer draws the conclusion that many teachers tend to equate disengagement with poor behavior and then miss identifying the 'quietly disengaged'. To address this a number of 'high performing schools' have behavioural change at the heart of their strategy. They identify effective **learning** behaviours, teach the behaviours explicitly and then reinforce these with a strong appraisal system and a focus on teaching as inquiry models.<sup>13</sup>

There is also an argument that increased student agency and an alignment of the teaching and learning programmes so they are relevant and meaningful to students will have a positive impact on cognitive engagement. This was articulated in 'Supporting Student Engagement' as follows:

*'Of the considerable range of factors that students felt impacted in important ways on their learning and achievement and attitudes to subjects before and after the transition, the message that predominated was: 'learning is easiest and most satisfying when the material and the ways in which we are undertaking it are interesting, relevant or personally meaningful, and enjoyable.'*

However, the writer points out that 'Fundamental to achieving the goal of interested, committed (young adolescent) learners is knowing the students well, so as to better establish their prior achievement levels, their learning strengths and weaknesses, particular interests, and also the particular pedagogies to which they relate best and will be most likely effective for helping them attain learning goals.'<sup>14</sup>

This suggests that perhaps addressing the emotional engagement of students is the first step to improving cognitive engagement.

This was definitely reflected in the conversations I had with schools that were seeking to address issues of engagement in their community as opposed to schools where students were performing academically. In these schools more time could be spent on 'innovation'.

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<sup>13</sup> *Engagement in Australian schools*, A paper prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2014) retrieved from [http://www.centralrangeslln.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement\\_in\\_Australian\\_Schools-Background\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.centralrangeslln.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement_in_Australian_Schools-Background_Paper.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Factors that influence student engagement. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Middle-schooling/Engagement> retrieved 25 July 2018

## 5. The Tension in the Classroom (reflections on E.D. Hirsch)

When it comes to designing engaging classroom experiences, it appears that we often find ourselves in a dualistic divide between two quite partisan camps of thought. In E.D Hirsch's book *"The Schools we need and why we don't have them"* it is suggested that teachers find themselves in caught having to juggle the tension between approaches such as:

- Traditional vs. 'modern' instruction
- Verbal vs. 'hands on' instruction
- Premature vs. developmentally appropriate instruction
- Fragmented vs. integrated instruction
- Boring vs. interesting instruction
- Lockstep vs. individualised instruction.<sup>15</sup>

Hirsch argues that this polarisation has created a sense of 'good guys and bad guys' that have simplified the issues. To have a truly engaging and learning focused classroom, we must be able to utilise all of the tools at our disposal and not reject 'unfashionable' approaches.

For example, Hirsch states that, "...an effective teacher can make almost any subject interesting and an ineffective one can make almost any subject dull."<sup>16</sup> The inference here is that the artistry of teaching requires an instinct and agility that identifies the best strategy for the best outcome.

Integrating both direct and indirect instructional methods, including inquiry learning and direct informing all have their place. Hirsch goes on to discuss the importance of 'dramatized instruction' and storytelling in effective classroom experiences. He calls for classrooms to miss no opportunity to combine skill instruction with "virtue and knowledge enhancing stories"...

*"Excellent classroom teaching has a narrative and dramatic feel even when there is a lot of interaction between the students and the teacher – it has a definite theme, and a beginning, middle and end. When every lesson has a well developed plot in which the children themselves are participants, teaching is both focused and absorbing."*

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<sup>15</sup> Hirsch, E. D. (1996). *The schools we need and why we don't have them*. New York: Doubleday.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

Underpinning all this is a bigger question. What do we want students to learn and why? Hirsch makes an interesting observation and a good case for preserving core content in the curriculum:

*If shared background knowledge is necessary for full participation in the larger national society, the same reasoning must also hold for full participation in the smaller social group, and especially the classroom itself. If shared knowledge is needed among citizens to understand newspapers as well as one another, then, by the same reasoning, shared knowledge is also needed among class members to understand the teacher and one another. Every classroom is a little society of its own, and its effectiveness and fairness depend on the full participation of all its members, just as in larger society. Such universal participation by students cannot occur unless they all share a core of relevant background knowledge.”*

While I have mentioned earlier that we can easily mistake participation with cognitive engagement the risk here is that without creating an equitable access to core knowledge, engagement in the learning offered becomes more difficult and less effective. The issue then may be not *how* we are teaching, but how we create the environment in which students are ready to learn it. This ties into the idea of ‘emotional engagement’...according to Hirsch, research suggests the best classrooms had a warm and supportive social atmosphere, but at the same time were business like and focused on the job at hand. He states that the worst performing classrooms were often “heavily affective” with a lot of verbal praise and self esteem talk. The best classes saw teachers respecting the students, but demanding hard work and discipline. The challenge for teachers here is to create effective professional learning relationships. In the current climate where student wellbeing issues are increasingly on top for many, this again points to a need for a readiness and clarity of role.

## **6. Conversations with schools**

During the sabbatical I visited a number of schools in New Zealand and overseas. Based on academic outcomes, these schools ranged from ‘high performing schools’ through to schools perceived as ‘less successful’. While academic results alone are a blunt instrument for measuring a school’s impact, it gave me a starting point for the discussions I had with school leaders and thinkers. The conversations I had focused on the school’s experience attempting to create a culture of engagement and touched on how school culture impacts on student wellbeing. We also discussed how course design and curriculum innovation was having an effect on student achievement and attendance.

## **School A**

School A is a low decile suburban school.

### **How does School A define engagement?**

In discussing this question, School A made it clear that academic results, while important, were not the focus of the work they had done regarding student engagement. It was clear that the imperative here was to engage students in the school as a place of belonging that catered to their need to be recognized and valued as a part of the community. Engagement was defined as students participating in and expressing the schools values. This was measured through changing behaviours. In particular, the measures were an increase in attendance, followed by a reduction in pastoral incidents and then finally an improvement in academic output. The outcome of the work done has been a shift towards a place where students, staff and whānau have 'a sense of belonging and feel connected, valued and culturally located'.

The discussion here resonated with me as I reflected on the three frameworks for engagement mentioned above. Here, the school had an explicit focus on the 'emotional engagement' of students that was measured by a change in 'behavioural engagement' and finally in 'cognitive engagement'.

### **What were the strategies and interventions used to shift the school toward a culture of engagement?**

The senior leaders of the school spoke of using the building blocks provided by the experience of Kia Eke Panuku and restorative practices to help frame up the changes they made. As a school with a large Māori cohort, the intervention focused itself around the school marae and on an agreed set of values that were explicitly taught and integrated into the school at every level. The focus on making the school a place of belonging where an individual's identity was celebrated was the first step. The values were drawn from the cultural competencies and centered on place based approaches and a culturally responsive lens.

The intervention started with a targeted group of students in a pilot programme. At the classroom level the holistic wellbeing of the student was made a priority and the evidence generated by the pilot led the school to embrace it school wide.

Students of the school have been given agency when it comes to deciding on the context for courses and there

is an expectation from the senior leadership team that the school's values will be explicitly addressed through the day-to-day teaching and learning experiences. As a part of this, student's cultures were valued and recognized in the course design.

The leaders I spoke to recognized the importance of the need to control the narrative and communicate the expectations regularly and explicitly. By their own admission, the school agreed that the shift had 'taken a long time' and that it would take a 'generation' for the true fruits of their strategy to show.

### **What is next for the school?**

The school leaders acknowledged that with any successful intervention there is a need to continually revisit it and avoid the temptation to 'pick up on the next thing' too quickly. They spoke about the challenge of sustaining school culture with naturally occurring staff turnover and a large transitory cohort. Induction and appraisal are a focus going forward as way of sustaining a focus on the school values. When appointing new staff, the school is sure to provide substantial information to the applicant so they are clear about what the school stands for. In an interview the questions asked are searching and check that the applicant understands what the school stands for and that they are prepared to embrace the philosophy.

There was also an acknowledgement that any set of school values cannot remain static and will need to change and adapt over time. Now that the foundations of 'belonging' to the school are beginning to embed themselves, there is talk of making it more explicit about how these values would then play out in relation to work output and academic attainment.

### **Goals and dispositions**

As a takeaway for me from this meeting, I feel that schools need to be careful that they do not confuse goals with dispositions. School A had a clear focus on establishing a 'disposition' for all in the community that would create the foundation for future goal setting. However, they did not confuse the disposition with the goal. They rightly saw the disposition as the vehicle that would enable greater student, teacher and community engagement going forward.

## **School B**

School B is a high decile primary school well known for its innovative programmes and future focus.

## **What has School B done to address engagement at the school?**

I spoke to the principal about the school's journey and what they had done to address engagement at the school. The principal was able to articulate that some of the changes the school had made to position itself for a future focused curriculum had been a challenge to some members of the wider community.

The main focus of engagement then for this school was to reestablish community engagement in the school and reinforce core values. According to the principal, a disconnect with the community had developed and this had expressed itself through a change in student behavior at the school.

With this in mind the school has developed a strategy to target behavioural engagement as a way of establishing security and stability for the community. However, the principal was quick to point out that by targeting behaviour, the intended outcomes were both a growth in emotional engagement in the school.

Interestingly, the principal identified that the emotional engagement of the staff was the most important factor in establishing the emerging culture. Without staff wellbeing and connection, all other goals or aspirations were hamstrung. They pointed out that by making behavioural engagement the focus of the strategy, staff grew in confidence that they were supported and that there were clear boundaries and expectations they could rely on. By then appointing new staff into key roles to role modeled the restorative and relational approaches required to reinforce the newly established expectations they school is now positioned to ask questions about cognitive engagement and best practice.

The principal stated that by addressing staff wellbeing (for example, limiting meetings, employing coaches and mentors, regularly acknowledging the valued contributions of different staff members to the school) that the work of emotionally engaging the community had come through the staff themselves. They became the vehicle of the vision because they felt they were receiving the benefits of it themselves in the first instance.

It is important to note that this is a project in motion and there is still clear work that the school is doing to address aspects of culture and engagement. However, a register of behavioural issues has shown there has been a steady decline in disciplinary incidents

## **An interesting aside**

When speaking about community engagement our conversation led to an interesting observation. The principal stated that the job teachers were being asked to do bore little resemblance to what they are trained to do. They were strong in their conviction that while teachers were graduating well versed in teaching and learning theory they were unprepared for the 'social work' dimensions that quickly emerged once they were in the classroom.

They felt that schools were increasingly required to not only be centres of learning but ambassadors of "common value" for the community. There is a pressure to be everything to all people and that teachers are not always trained for that challenge. They said that schools were increasingly responsible for community cohesion and in a moment of jest joked, "I feel more and more like the leader of a cult".

## **School C**

*"If you want to engage them, make them successful"*

School C is a high performing and stable suburban school. Their leadership has worked hard to instill into the school a values based culture centered on relational and restorative practices. From this foundation, work has been done to improve the academic outcomes of students by targeted interventions.

What is interesting about the intervention is that has been made possible because of a change in relational culture. After establishing restorative practices in the school and gathering student voice, the school leadership set about identifying approximately 25 students in Y10 they believed were at risk of not engaging academically. These students and their families were communicated with explicitly by the school and informed about why they were on the list. This made the intervention transparent in a way that brought the challenge into focus.

The students were then consulted with regularly about what was working for them in class and that was fed back to classroom teachers. These teachers would regularly meet to share strategies about how to best work with the student on the mentoring list to get results.

The data I was shown told a story of an effective intervention that saw almost all the students on the

mentoring list make notable progress. The principal identified that a key to the success of the intervention was:

- Employing the right person to manage the initiative
- Developing in the staff a growth mindset
- Having a strength based approach to the students
- Sustaining a holistic view of the students progress as opposed to a subject based one
- Using a with not too approach
- Regularly sharing the data with the staff so they could see the progress and result of their work

As a result of growing academic success, the attendance of this cohort of students also improved.

### **Importance of transition**

School C also identified transition as a crucial aspect in sustaining engagement. To that end, the school has appointed a 'transition dean' to ensure that students arriving at the school are given a bridge between the experiences. The transition dean works to smooth over the impact of changing gears and entering into a secondary school environment and promotes the schools foundational values and outlook.

### **Using student leaders**

Another intervention was using senior students as 'teachers' to role model good learning habits to the juniors. This promoted the importance of the subject while reinforcing effective dispositions towards learning. For example, according to the leader getting a Year 13 student to come and 'teach' a Year 9 class a concept had real impact on encouraging reluctant learners.

### **Curriculum choices**

With the growth in school retention rates, the school is also keen to embrace new curriculum choices for students who stay but are not considering university. In this case, the school offers courses such as childcare, bike maintenance and psychology. This seems to be a growing issue for many secondary schools who have been successful at emotionally engaging their cohort. These students who have been sustained by a culture of belonging can have little incentive to leave. The school recognizes that they have a role to play beyond just preparing young people for the next step. In the words of the principal, the school needs to offer not qualifications but "incredible learning opportunities".

## School D

School D is a high performing urban single sex school.

The meetings I had with School D revealed to me a line of thinking and an underlying set of principles that were very much about wellbeing and holistic development. This school has fantastic academic results and an excellent reputation. When I asked the senior leader I met with how the school defined engagement, she immediately replied:

“Through wellbeing...every decision we make is made through the lens of wellbeing. And wellbeing is our most valued outcome.”

In a school that produces inspiring academic performances, the senior leader was quick to make the observation that students were, “...not as cognitively engaged as results may suggest” and that much of the success was “...very teacher dependent”. Through consultation and gathering student voice it was identified that high performance, while obviously celebrated, had led to a culture that was increasing anxious and risk averse students. It was clear that students were leaving the school with incredible qualifications, but the next step was to develop a holistic culture that helped the students grow in capacity.

With wellbeing the focus the school set about to create a different kind of engagement culture. This time the interventions focused on developing a graduate profile that addressed the whole person and a ‘living vision’ that required classroom teachers to consider carefully the following questions:

- What capacities do the students in your class need to develop?
- What are you doing in the classroom to help students meet the graduate profile?

There was also a huge focus on student leadership. These leadership opportunities gave students the agency to address wellbeing concerns they identified in an organic and authentic way. The outcome of encouraging students to take on more leadership opportunities saw a growth in clubs, student voice and identification with the school.

### **Culture as a projection?**

As a part of this interview we discussed how much influence the school actually had on generating culture. We

discussed that schools often have a culture projected onto and the challenge is how to receive that culture and mould it into something different.

To a large extent the 'risk averse' culture mentioned earlier was something *received* by the school and perpetuated by the 'echo chamber' the students generated themselves. Ideas like "you're not valued if you don't get Excellence" were never advocated by the school. However, it was acknowledged that if that was the narrative the students were telling themselves, the narrative needed to be explicitly addressed. The school recognized that they needed to provide a new language for the students that told a different story. The idea was that as that language was adopted it would shift the conversation and promote a new way of seeing the school experience. This would champion success as more than achievement, but in holistic wellbeing too.

## **School E**

School E is a high decile single sex urban school.

I met with the principal of school E for an afternoon and had a fascinating discussion. The principal shared their experiences of leading different schools and articulated different strategies that had been used to generate student engagement that were unique to the different environments they had been a leader in.

While the principal said they were focused on achievement, this did not come without creating a sense of belonging. To create a sense of belonging engages students in the fundamental community needed to have a functioning learning focus.

To do this, the principal had established structures in the schools he had worked in that gave language and reference points for students to belong to. These included:

- Introducing a house system
- Connecting the houses to local history to create a sense of legacy
- Using the established structures to give opportunity for communal belonging
- Actively and explicitly articulating what community looks like by reflecting examples back to the school of when they demonstrate or live it. ("This is what community looks like" ...see it...name it...).
- Recognising when it is time for a rebranding
- Find success, actively celebrate it, then explicitly tie it to school values.
- Work with students who transition into the school intentionally to give them a sense of place by

- The principal calling their home in the first week to see how they are going
- The principal giving them a personal tour
- The principal visiting new students in class and have a morning tea or reconnect in the first few weeks.

What impressed me during this visit was the intentional way in which the school leader actively set out to curate and sustain community and belonging as the founding block for any further success. This approach is very much in line with the idea of 'emotional engagement' and suggests again the wellbeing of students is key to engagement.

## **School F**

School F is a middle decile suburban integrated school

*"There is no measure of success explicitly connected to pass rates or excellence credits"*

The senior leader I spoke to at School F was very quick to point out that student engagement at this school was focused on developing the whole person. The consistent messaging is "be the best version of yourself...the person God intended you to be...this looks different for everyone." The senior leader said that the purpose of the school was to give the students the appropriate support to become that person and that while academic results were important, the *engagement* focus was not connected to pass rates. This holistic message was communicated everywhere everyday through daily reflections, assemblies (the whole school meets everyday) and retreats. The school was committed to small tutor groups (currently averaging 13 students) to ensure that students felt known and noticed.

The senior leader acknowledged that being an integrated school meant they were able to have a 'clear articulation of a non-negotiable sense of who we are together" and that this was something "bought into on enrolment."

## **School G (New Zealand University)**

*"I'm told to expect students to come to class ready for discussion...it doesn't happen"...how can that energy be curated?"*

I spoke to members of the Teaching and Online Consultant at the Albany campus from Massey University about student engagement in the tertiary sector. In these discussions it was stated that in many areas the university is struggling to engage students as deeply as they would like too. In some of the student observations collected it has even become apparent that in many cases students don't even know the names of their lecturers. Other feedback from students has suggested the expectation of what a learning experience looks and feels like at university is changing. With the advent of online platforms, it was pointed out that student feedback has suggested that, "There is no purpose in being in the classroom...why bother going to class if it is just 'content'?"

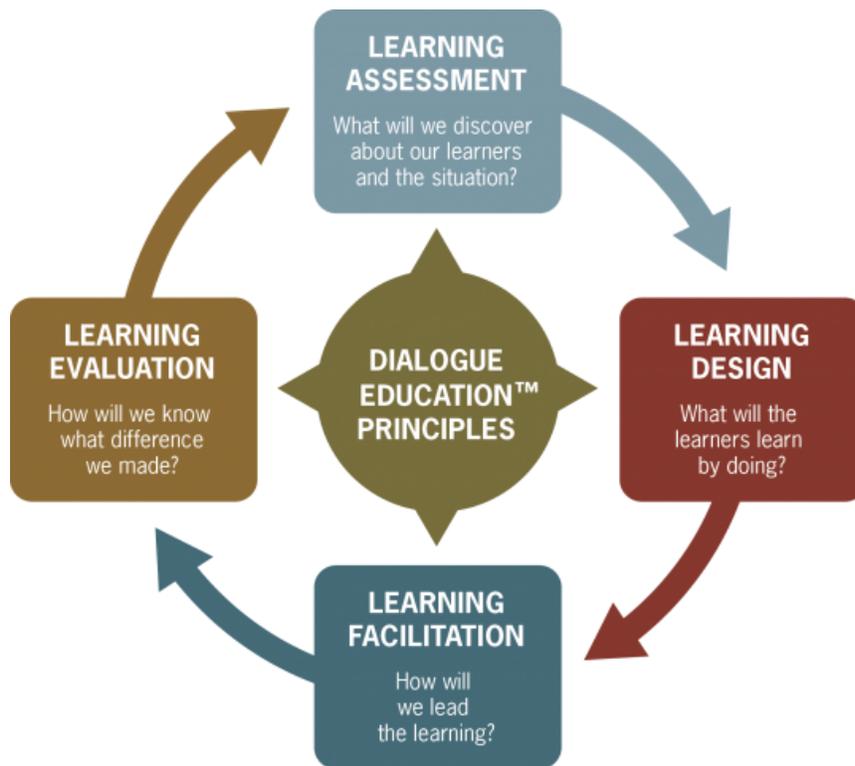
As a response to this kind of challenge, Jane has decided when it comes to her own study that she will only do it "... if the assessment looks interesting...and never sits exams..."

### **Online learning**

We discussed the impact of online learning as a way on engaging students. The assessment was that "...flipped classrooms only work if the teacher is skilled in facilitating not only teacher student relationships but relationship between students." In their opinion, one of the biggest challenges facing many university learning opportunities is the reluctance for students to engage with each other, or a lack of skill in doing so. They felt addressing this was urgent because of the impact of digital platforms and that students are craving human connection. Good practitioners will be someone with the skill to show them *how* to relate. For example, setting up basic interactions to give students the opportunity to practice participation.

### **A strategy being used**

There people I spoke to believe in "Learning centred learning as opposed to 'student centred learning' as a way of creating engaging experiences and advocated for the 4 A's approach to engagement and education. This is also known as dialogue education. This approach is summarised in the flowchart below:



My discussion with the university was helpful as it offered a different flavour than the conversation I have had with secondary and primary leaders. However, it was interesting to me that the *relational* aspect was once again a key concern. In many ways, what we spoke about tied nicely into the idea of ‘emotional engagement’ as the key starting place for any cognitive or learning experience to really flourish.

## An overseas perspective

As a part of the sabbatical I was fortunate enough to travel to the United Kingdom. While overseas I spent time in two schools and met with members from the Institute of Education, University of London. I asked the same questions I have been asking of New Zealand schools and sought an overseas perspective of the issues surrounding student engagement.

## School H

School H is a co-ed secondary academy school in Beckenham in the London Borough of Bromley. The school is boys only until girls are accepted in the sixth form.

In my meetings with teaching staff and the Head teacher it was clear that the school had a clear focus on “educating the whole child” and while academic performance was still very important, the school identified the need for a more holistic approach. The school itself was modern, well resourced and supported by a long tradition. The Head acknowledged that the traditions of the school created a strong foundational expectation of what it meant to be a student at the school and what engagement looked like. This was something passed on over generations and the expectation of the kind of experience students would have at the school was clearly understood by the contributing community.

### **School Charter**

As a way of engaging students in holistic education the school was in the process of introducing a ‘school charter’ for students. This school charter is a way for students to gain recognition and reward for their achievements that take place outside the classroom.

The Charter consists of 50 achievements grouped into eight categories.

1. Beyond the curriculum
2. Represent your school
3. School citizenship
4. Sport
5. Performing arts
6. Outdoor education
7. School trips and visits
8. Community engagement

Once students have met 20 achievements they receive a charter certificate. If they gain more achievements they can be awarded Charter Colours and receive a special badge:

- 25 achievements = Bronze
- 30 achievements = Silver
- 35 achievements = Gold

The culture of the school lends itself to this kind of approach as the student body is motivated by extrinsic recognition and gaining colours.

### **Other observations of interest**

## **Subject clubs**

As an extracurricular activity, every subject offers a 'club' that offers extension and enrichment. These clubs are well attended and offer a zero-pressure environment where students can explore learning without the pressure of assessment.

## **No cell phones until Year 12**

The school also has a policy that bans cell phones until the senior year. While there is ample opportunity to use technology at all levels, the school is focused on building learning habits and disciplinary competency without the distraction of devices.

## **Environment**

The school's environment and physical setting was impressive. The buildings were treated with respect by the student body and there was a real sense of pride about the place. The teaching staff was focused and professional. The buy in to the school's narrative and traditions is an important factor the school's success. The whole experience was impressive and appealing.

## **School I**

School I is a large mixed comprehensive school for pupils aged 11–19, located in Kidbrooke in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, London.

In a far-reaching conversation with the Head Teacher I was able to get real sense of how the school considered its role in the community and how it was setting out to generate a culture of engagement.

## **What are schools for?**

Before any further conversation about engagement, the Head Teacher was strong in her opinion that we first need to be clear about what we believe schools are for. If we cannot answer that question, then no intervention or innovation will stick.

For her school, it was essential that children were valued *as children*, that there was a focus on holistic learning and setting an example of participatory citizenship. The schools purpose could be summed up in one sentence. Anything more was too much. At School I the purpose is for students to 'understand the world and be prepared to change it for the better'.

In her opinion, every school has a story/history/narrative. Schools need to accept that narrative and work with it to change or tell a new story without dismissing the past. Rebranding is a dangerous activity as it can unwittingly undermine the positive legacy a school has in spite of its challenges.

### **The importance of systems and specialists**

To make positive change, the leadership team identified two key ways of intervening that have made a real difference. These two approaches can be summed up as implementing effective, predictable systems and appointing specialists with clear job descriptions who are given total agency in their area of expertise.

Systematised behavioural management approaches have made a real impact at the school. They have created a security for both staff and students and a clear set of expectations and understood outcomes when those expectations are breached. In addition the school has seriously resourced pastoral care and welfare. This has seen a number of non-teaching staff become involved in restorative practices and frees senior leaders up from what she called 'impossible jobs'.

Another intervention was refining the responsibilities of the senior leadership team to make their roles manageable and meaningful. Rather than having deputy heads attempting to be all things to all people, she quickly defined roles and gave agency to senior leaders to work in those roles as they saw fit. She made it clear that appointing the right specialists was essential here, but that creating sustainable and manageable positions was crucial to happy engaged staff.

By having a clear sense of purpose and narrative, having clear systems and effective specialists the Head teacher has been able to see the school become a place that is engaging a wide range of students from a variety of diverse backgrounds. While the school continues to face the challenges that come with socio-economic disparity and a changing demographic, the leadership has a clear vision and the courage to make interventions to address them.

## **7. Tribe (conclusions)**

Having considered the question of engagement I am coming to the conclusion that what really matters will be to develop school culture where young people are connected, have a sense of the necessity of their contribution and real agency in the communities they live in. We are living in a time where being connected is

concurrently easier and somehow more dislocating than ever. Whether this be global, local, or personal I believe making and keeping meaningful, and genuine connection is increasingly important.

Author Sebastian Junger wrote a book called 'Tribe' which attempts to deal with the issue of how modern society is disengaging us from each other and warns that the consequences cannot be ignored.

The book resonated with much of what I have been reading about student engagement too.

Junger argues that, *'Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary. Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary.'*<sup>17</sup>

Philip Caputo notes in his review of the book that Junger begins the book with an interesting observation:

*'From the late 17th to the late 19th century, hundreds of white settlers were seized by Indians, and almost all chose to remain with their captors when offered a chance to return to their families. Benjamin Franklin, years before the American Revolution, lamented to a friend that he knew of no Indian voluntarily joining what he considered civilized society, while ransomed white captives soon grew disgusted with "our manner of life" and took the first opportunity to escape back "into the woods." They chose to be with the Indians because they found the intensely communal, egalitarian nature of tribal life preferable to colonial civilization.'*<sup>18</sup>

The suggestion is that this had something to do with these prisoners having discovered, in spite of the hardships of life in captivity, that their contributions to tribe were valued and necessary. It was the knowledge that their participation and contribution to tribal life was noted and worthwhile that motivated the return to their captors.

This thought moved me because it reveals that just being in a community is not enough. Being recognised, contributing and experiencing the profundity of shared joy and suffering seemed to make these people's lives that much more significant. They felt necessary.

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<sup>17</sup> Junger, S. (2016). *Tribe: On homecoming and belonging*. New York: Twelve.

<sup>18</sup> Caputo, P. (2016, May 18). The dangerous drift from our tribal roots. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/do-we-need-to-recover-our-tribal-roots/2016/05/18/820918fe-0b33-11e6-a6b6-2e6de3695b0e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.43ede083fd77](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/do-we-need-to-recover-our-tribal-roots/2016/05/18/820918fe-0b33-11e6-a6b6-2e6de3695b0e_story.html?utm_term=.43ede083fd77)

Perhaps what really matters when considering student engagement is prioritising the development of a community of learning where students learn what it means to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

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