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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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A number of the contributors in this book suggest very specific strategies for optimising learner engagement. John Davitt, for example, encourages the idea of engagement as 'doing' – where learners are asked to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways and through means other than simply writing; while Mike Gershon suggests using discussion to help learners refine and articulate their ideas before they engage in a writing task. Susan Wallace, on the other hand, focuses on teacher behaviour, suggesting that one of the most effective ways of encouraging engagement is for the teacher to model the desired attitude by presenting themselves as enthusiastic and highly motivated.

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

From this compendium of expert voices, then, three important themes emerge about engagement: that teachers' engagement and positive example should be seen as a prerequisite for establishing learner motivation; that learners' interest needs to be actively engaged, whether by meaningful challenge or by tapping into their natural curiosity; and that an expectation of appropriate behaviour must precede expectations of engagement. And, of course, as Ian Gilbert points out, to encourage engaged behaviour we need first to banish classroom boredom. In these pages you will find many practical suggestions of ways to do exactly that.

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

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

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

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

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

FURTHER READING

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If we want children to learn, they need to feel *engaged* with what they are learning, and *motivated* to learn it. These two facets of good teaching often cause confusion: some feel this is the same as saying teachers must make their lessons 'fun'. But that is a misreading of what is meant by these terms. You can feel fully engaged with something that you find difficult, if you see the purpose in what you are doing. You can feel highly motivated to struggle on with something hard, if you envisage a positive end result. Learning is often jolly hard work, and not much fun at all, but part of our job as teachers is to help children to stick at it.

There are many ways that a teacher can help students to feel motivated and engaged. (My book, *Getting the Buggers to Behave*, has a chapter on 'teaching for good behaviour'.) Often, it is about the relationship you have with your students: if they respect and want to please you, they are more likely to work well. If you have a passion for learning, and for the subjects you teach, this comes across in everything you do. You can find ways to make learning feel relevant and purposeful to your children – for instance, by using topical events or interesting resources. You can use targets and adapt the pace of the lesson to help the children maintain focus. You can tell stories, crack jokes, incorporate anecdotes and do a million other things to make the children *want* to learn what you need to teach.

There are many things in teaching that we can't change; the systems, the managers, the inspectors, the particular children we are given to teach. But there is one thing that we *can* change, one thing over which we *do* have control, and that is how we decide to teach. Yes, students have a responsibility to engage with lessons and work hard, but we can't do much about it if they refuse (apart from punishing them, which is counterproductive). Instead of focusing on what your students need to change about themselves, take control of your teaching and decide what you need to change about yourself. Be responsive, adaptable, creative and flexible. Think about what works for you as a learner, and then apply that to your kids.

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Cowley, Sue (2014). *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (London: Bloomsbury).

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I love seeing how organisations work; walking through the doors and feeling the vision in action. I am a lucky boy as I have had the opportunity to visit some pretty cool places. My favourite, and I know that I'm showing off here, is the headquarters of Google: 'The Googleplex' in California. From the minute you arrive, you can't help being struck by the sheer energy and dynamic of the place; amazing people doing incredible things.

Of course, this vibe is no accident. When you ask around, what you realise is that the positive philosophy is built on the concept that I call, 'the assumption of excellence'. Google consider their staff to be the best of the best: highly skilled, intelligent and creative people. They are not 'managed' because the belief is that all 'Googlers' will excel; there is only intervention if people, for whatever reason, don't live up to that. This creates a culture of very high expectation but complete buy-in; people feel trusted and empowered, they feel free to create, collaborate and innovate and, most importantly, they believe that what they are doing is of real value.

Sometimes I fear that education policy and systems are designed from the opposing view – an assumption of incompetence. Political thinking would have us believe that teachers will only do their best if they are managed and pressured into doing so and that pupils are intrinsically lazy and therefore need managing, at times micromanaging, in order to succeed. I passionately believe that as teachers and school leaders we should trust in our profession and our children more. We should audit our thinking and practice and build a culture that shouts about an assumption of excellence.

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The average human lifespan is 4,000 weeks. If you announce that statistic to Year 3s they leap around, punching the air: 'Woo-hoo! Thanks for telling us, Andy. That's like … forever!' But if you announce it to an adult audience there is less punching of the air and more of a collective gulp. The chances are your 4,000 weeks are zipping by in a blur.

As a teacher, there's a high probability of you being in a near-permanent state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Can you remember the last time you had sex on a school night? *Exactly!* You have a to-do list that's longer than both arms. Let me guess, you haven't got enough hours in the day to tick everything on that list? I appreciate that this causes you some angst, but my 300 words here are about something much bigger. Running alongside your to-do list is what I call your to-be list. And, in teaching, your to-be list is *everything*, because it dares you to point the finger back at yourself and ask, 'Who am I being while I'm doing my job?'

Am I being worn out by a wet break and an impending Ofsted visit? Or am I being radiant, positive, energetic and full of passion? Here's the spooky bit: by focusing on your to-be list, you are going to be more optimistic, creative, energetic, happy and, in a bizarre twist of quantum psychology, you will get more things ticked off your to-do list.

There's no denying that it takes a modicum of effort and practice to be your best self. Mediocrity is so tempting and easy. But my message is simple: the effort is well worthwhile. While focusing on your to-be list will not guarantee sex on a school night, it will massively improve your odds of having an all-round brilliant life.

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Cope, Andy and Bradley, Amy (2016). *The Little Book of Emotional Intelligence: How to Flourish in a Crazy World* (London: John Murray Learning).

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The psychologist Carl Rogers (1902–1987) tells us that a positive relationship between learner and teacher is essential if effective learning is to take place. A positive relationship in this context doesn't mean that we have to act as though we're the pupils' best mate, but it does require us to build up a working relationship of mutual trust and respect. This isn't always easy. Learners of any age may come to us having had negative or even destructive experiences of being 'taught'. Their confidence in their own ability to learn may have been undermined, along with their enthusiasm for being in your – or anyone's – classroom. We always need to take into account, therefore, the possibility that a loss of motivation, leading to disengagement and – in some cases – non-compliant or confrontational behaviour, may have its roots in this fractured relationship.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to try to mend it, however resistant our learners appear to be. We can do this most effectively by modelling for our pupils ways of relating and interacting within the classroom that are positive, encouraging and respectful. This also means making pupils feel that we value them and the time we spend with them; that we are happy to be there, working with them; and that our enthusiasm for them and the subject we're teaching them is boundless.

This is a tall order, certainly – especially on a bad day. But it's a long-term strategy that's well worth persevering with.

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Wallace, Susan (2013). *Managing Behaviour in Further and Adult Education: Achieving QLTS*, 3rd edn (London: Learning Matters/SAGE).

Wallace, Susan (2017). *Motivating Unwilling Learners in Further Education: The Key to Improving Behaviour* (London: Bloomsbury).

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I'm often asked how teachers should improve (normally low) motivation for maths at school. My answer is simple: give them problems to solve that they might care about! Things like 'Am I normal?', 'Are girls better at maths?' or 'Are home football referees biased?' Not what's x in $x^2 + x + 1 = 0$.

Maths is one of the world's most successful problem-solving systems, but we need to start with a problem that we (or our students) actually want to solve, not an abstraction they don't care about – and worse still wouldn't even ever use.

Maths is so important in today's real world because computers allow us to apply it to far more complex, real problems than when humans had to do all the calculating. Yet in education we're stuck on simplistic and often meaningless-to-the-student questions because we insist that the humans, not the computers, do the calculating. Teachers need to ask the fuzzy questions (like the ones you get in life) and the students should be using the power of abstract maths formulations (however complex) and coding to get the answer with help from their computer. It's much more motivating being a first-rate problem-solver than a third-rate human computer failing to compete with a machine! It's what the students crucially need for their futures, and what society does too.

Of course, different students will find different problems interesting, so be as flexible as possible in what they can work on. After all, what's so powerful about maths is how disparate problems can often be solved with the same toolset.

Confidence is also central – of the teacher to be outsmarted (isn't it great when that happens?) and of the students to ask if they don't get something or to try a 'crazy' idea. Killing the idea kills education.

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Wolfram, Conrad (n.d.). Making the Case, *Computer-Based Math*. Available at: http://www.computerbasedmath.org/case-for-computer-based-math-education.html.

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