

Table of Contents

About the Author	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	
Engagement	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
Relationships	5
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
Emotion	23
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
Environment	47
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
Motivation	61
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
Fun	81
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
Confidence	95
<i>Chapter 7</i>	
Attitudes	109
<i>Chapter 8</i>	
Cultural Awareness	129
<i>Chapter 9</i>	
Expectations	139

*Chapter 10***The Engagement Toolbox** _____ 155*Chapter 11***Creativity** _____ 171*Chapter 12***Soft Skills** _____ 187**References and Resources** _____ 205

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Introduction

Engagement

Engagement is a hot topic these days among educators at all levels and in all disciplines—and for a good reason. We in education have worked diligently to rebuild standards, curricula, and assessment tools to provide excellence and achievement. With the wonders of modern technology, we have been able to measure, group, and disaggregate data; spotlight skills that were lacking at specific grade levels; and even point the electronic finger at teachers whose students weren't performing or progressing as well as expected. Now we're faced with the one variable that can turn all this effort into ash: the students.

Even when the standards, scope, and sequence seem logical and rigorous, there is no guarantee of success unless the students cooperate and participate in their own education. The students must buy in to the need to follow the carefully tagged, labeled, and filed guides and manuals. So, slowly the eyes of the education community are turning toward what makes a student do what the educator has decided the student must do. That's why engagement has gained hot-topic status. How do we best engage and motivate our students so that all the work we have done has a chance of bearing high-stakes fruit?

Engagement exists in the realm of feeling and contact. This terrain is much different than that of the world of response to data, formulated interchanges, or facts stripped of meaning. You can't *will* or force another person to be engaged, and your motives for engaging your students need to be purer than a desire for higher scores on standardized tests, or those young eyes will see through you immediately!

Teachers and curriculum creators are discovering that a logical presentation of information alone—although very appealing to the adult brain—doesn't stimulate or entice young learners enough to keep them interested and involved (Caine & Caine, 2001). There is more to learning than logic. We are dealing not with little machines but rather with living organisms that react to the world, each other, and the classroom with diverse emotions, minds, bodies, backgrounds, agendas, and needs.

Engagement is a necessary part of the complexity of learning, and there are many concrete actions a teacher can take to successfully engage his or her students. Some of these actions have their roots in human biology research, especially brain research of the last fifteen to twenty years.

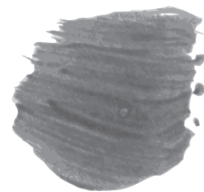
The more we know about how the brain functions, the better our choices when deciding on what strategies and interactions to use with our students. For example, studies have verified that emotions are contagious (Goleman, 1991). If a teacher is excited about a topic or lesson, then the students' brains pick up that feeling and react with excitement as well. If a teacher shows distaste for the material in any manner, the students reflect that emotion and believe they have a free pass to not participate or put forth any effort. A teacher who walks into the classroom and announces, "You are lucky you came to school today. You are going to love what we're going to do!" is constructing an emotional state of upbeat anticipation.

With all this in mind, I invite you to learn how to recognize what engages students and brings out their best. I invite you to consider what shifts you can make to create an environment in which students feel confident and safe enough to take risks, make mistakes, and immerse themselves in stimulating learning experiences. Above all, you can bring authentic joy for learning into your classroom.

Each chapter of this book is divided into three segments. "Notes From the Field" illustrates the chapter's topic in a real-life frame through mediums such as journal entries, vignettes, and student comments. "The Discussion" provides a closer look at the topic, including research and the topic's importance and relevance in the classroom. "Steps Toward Solutions" offers practical strategies for implementing the discussed ideas in the classroom.

Woven throughout these chapters are opportunities for reflection. When people say that John Dewey, one of the foremost early education reformers and philosophers, was a proponent of *doing* as the most natural path to learning, they are only half right. Dewey also emphasized that doing without reflection is ineffective. Unless we turn concepts into knowledge that we can accept as our own, they don't stick with us, much less change us. You will be encouraged to mull over the topic—how you feel about the issue—before the discussion and research have their say. This activity serves to prime the intellectual pump and gives the discussion section a deeper richness and validity. After the chapter has paraded its wares across the pages, a final reflection opportunity is provided, allowing you to compare your thoughts with those discussed and encouraging you to choose an idea to try out in your own classroom. Writing down a goal for action cements that idea in your brain and boosts the chances for its implementation.

Chapter 1 focuses on relationships. For many students today, engagement doesn't exist if there is no relationship with the teacher. Where, when, what, and how much we speak with students are all part of the relationship mechanism that sets the groundwork for student engagement. Although verbal



Relationships

A central theme in Bel Kaufman's novel *Up the Down Staircase* (1965)—as timely today as it was years ago—is that the human encounter between teacher and student is often a more powerful teaching tool than the academic content, the grade, the data analysis, and the hours spent picking apart the curriculum for discrete facts that must be mastered. In this first chapter, our goal is to value and respect that human encounter. Before we can reach, and, in turn, teach, our students, we must first develop a viable relationship with them.

First Thoughts on Relationships

This chapter addresses the quality of your relationship with students as being an outgrowth of your ability to communicate. What kinds of small talk do you use with your students? What is the usual substance of your noncontent communications? How do you perceive your body language and other forms of communication with your students?

The class conversation should then move to what kind of emotional responses a person might choose to display and act on. We all feel emotions, but we don't have to respond to each of them physically. Discussing how people can feel emotions but not allow the emotions to dictate their behavior is crucial for helping children recognize and build control over impulsive behavior.

Following is a sample exercise to accompany this conversation using text from a novel.

1. Using a page of text (you can use any page from material you are teaching that would work for you), ask the students to identify the emotions of the characters involved in the action on the page as well as the physical manifestations of those emotions. For example, following is a paragraph from Paul Langan's (2002) book *The Bully* centering on one of the characters:

Rage boiled within Darrell, so much so that tears welled in his eyes, making him look as if he really was crying. He hated himself for being so small and weak that he could be humiliated just a few blocks from his own house and he hated Tyray with every cell in his body. But he felt that if he even tried to hit Tyray, he would be beaten to a bloody pulp, that he might never make it home. (p. 66)

2. Have the students compare what they find in pairs or groups of three, explaining what words signaled what emotions to them.
3. Discuss as a whole class how writers tend to use and explain the emotional feelings of characters and why they do this.
4. Ask students to write a couple of paragraphs about two characters meeting during the school day and include not only what they are talking about but how they are feeling and what their body language is displaying.
5. Have the students exchange papers and find the emotions and their manifestations in the paragraphs.

Add Emotion to Writing Prompts

We often give students writing prompts for narrative versions of the materials we are covering. By adding an emotion component to the prompt, we help students produce more thoughtful and better quality results. Following is such a prompt to be used after students have read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel.

You are Elie ten years after being freed from the concentration camp, and you are to receive a container with seven items from those days ten years ago. You will begin your paper by explaining how you receive the container,

where you are, and what it looks like. Then you will open it, and as you pull out each item, you will write about:

1. *The major emotion it brings out in you*
2. *A description of what the item actually is and looks like*
3. *What event in the book it is connected to—including names, places, as many specifics as possible*

Table 2.3: Super List of Emotions

Abandoned	Alive	Beaten down	Celebrating
Ablaze	Alluring	Bemused	Chagrined
Abominable	Alone	Betrayed	Charmed
Abrasive	Altruistic	Bewildered	Charming
Absorbed	Ambiguous	Bewitched	Chastened
Absurd	Ambitious	Bitter	Cheerful
Abused	Amenable	Blah	Cherished
Abusive	Amorous	Blessed	Cold
Accommodating	Amused	Blissful	Cold-blooded
Acknowledged	Angry	Boiling	Collected
Acquiescent	Anguished	Bored	Comatose
Acrimonious	Animated	Bothered	Comfortable
Admonished	Annoyed	Brave	Compassionate
Adored	Anxious	Breathless	Competitive
Adventurous	Apathetic	Breezy	Complacent
Affected	Appealing	Bright	Composed
Affectionate	Appeasing	Broken	Concerned
Afflicted	Appetizing	Bruised	Confused
Affronted	Appreciated	Buoyant	Congenial
Afraid	Apprehensive	Burdensome	Content
Aggravated	Ardent	Bursting	Cool
Aggressive	Argumentative	Callous	Copasetic
Agitated	Armored	Calm	Coping
Agreeable	Aroused	Captivated	Cordial
Airy	Arrogant	Captivating	Cornered
Awkward	Astounded	Careless	Creative
Alienated	Attentive	Caring	Crucified

Continued →

Steps Toward Solutions

It seems to me, engagement is a few things. The first is to believe that every kid can—and wants to—learn. The desire to get better at stuff and to unravel mysteries is part of being human. The second is to connect what kids learn to the big picture. In our quest for reading, writing, and arithmetic, we sometimes lose sight of the fourth R: relevance. Finally, while people do have different abilities, it's clear that persistence, practice, great coaching, and high expectations are more important than innate talent. That makes a teacher's job even more important than we already know it is.

—Daniel Pink

The 2009 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* reported some rather disturbing statistics: although 86 percent of teachers feel that their expectations are important to student performance, only 36 percent of teachers and 51 percent of principals believe that the students they work with have the ability to arrive at academic success (MetLife, 2009). In this section, we will work on setting high expectations for all of our students by examining our own expectations of others and considering elements that could influence how we judge our students' abilities.

Foster High Expectations

We often create unconscious prejudices against those who are least like us—in culture, race, personality, socioeconomic status, and so on—and think these children are unlikely to perform as well as those children who are similar to us. Because of this propensity to harbor low expectations for such children, I suggest that you determine which struggling student would be the least likely to be your child, and mentally “adopt” him or her for the school year. Decide that this child—like Justin—will succeed and you will pull out all the stops to see that he or she does. Don't tell the child what you are doing, of course. If you succeed with this child, other children will benefit from this experience because you will have developed a sensitivity that affects all other such children. You will prove to yourself that under the right circumstances, all children can learn!

A variation on this exercise is to decide that a child in your class is the son or daughter of a board member, principal, or district superintendent. Again, choose a child that you are tempted to think negatively about, one who seems to irritate or exasperate you more than the others in the class. Note in what

The Discussion

Most toolboxes have a variety of items tucked inside: some are serious, high-powered tools for very precise purposes; some are basics; some are gadgets; and some are simply leftovers from fix-it jobs. The engagement toolbox is no different. There are serious, high-powered tools, such as formative assessments, meaning and relevance, and technology. There are basics, such as the application of multiple intelligences and project-based learning. And there are great gadgets and fix-it items, such as cameras and props. All these come into play when we attempt to reach and teach our students.

Take My Picture! Using Your Camera as a Tool

When teachers engage students, they are leading with the students' interests in mind. Nothing seems to stimulate a student's interest, self-esteem, curiosity, or feeling of involvement like a picture of himself or herself in the classroom. The ultimate tool for the classroom teacher is a camera.

Maximize Memory

When posting pictures of students involved in lessons and projects, a teacher is maximizing students' memories. Seeing themselves and those they know working on class content creates a positive emotional response, which reinforces the memory of the event tremendously. Researchers have discovered that ideas are much more likely to be remembered if they are presented as pictures instead of words or pictures paired with words. Psychologists call this picture superiority effect (PSE). If information is presented orally, people remember about 10 percent of the content seventy-two hours later. That figure goes up to 65 percent if you add a picture (Gallo, 2009).

Tapping into PSE is far easier today than ever before. Digital cameras are reasonably priced, can download pictures immediately to a computer, and can even offer video that is clear and easily accessible. The Flip, a small video camera, is probably one of the more user-friendly, reasonably priced cameras, offering high definition and instant playback viewing. The uses for cameras in the classroom are limited only by the imagination of the teacher.

Strengthen Reading Fluency

Building reading fluency is often more difficult with older students. Although the repeated reading of a piece is probably the best way to strengthen reading fluency, it is not likely to be sold to a group of adolescents as easily as it is to elementary children. A great way to embed fluency is to provide a platform for performance. If students are told that they will be filmed while

Notes From the Field

I have a tattoo. It's the size of a nickel and on the heel of my right hand. If you don't look closely, you could easily think that a child drew on me with a couple of markers or that I let my hand rest on a wet page of a coloring book. I'm not the most likely person to be sporting a tattoo: I'm in my mid-sixties, a resident of a pretty conservative area in a very conservative state, a grandmother to thirteen children, and I spent the hippie revolution behind semi-cloistered, religious-order doors from 1962 to 1969. No, not your typical Bad Donkey Tattoo Parlor customer. But to my husband's utter amazement, I found it proper and fitting at this point in my life to have my flesh marked with a statement that I didn't want to let slip away, that I wanted to have dug into my psyche as well as my body.

My tattoo is an aleph (see fig. 12.1). The explanation of its meaning and form is taken from Itzhak Bentov's (2000) book *A Brief Tour of Higher Consciousness*. The aleph is pronounced "ah" and is the basic sound of the universe coming from the lungs unobstructed. Although the aleph is recognized by many as the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it is a far more ancient archetypal symbol embedded in human consciousness. It consists of three energy centers: the one on the left represents love; the one on the right represents will; the one in the center represents creation; and the sum of these three is wisdom. Each center radiates a different color symbolizing the quality of its energy frequency—gold for *love*, blue for *will*, red for *creation*—that together form the white light of wisdom.



Figure 12.1: Aleph.

Now here is the important part of this whole piece: in Hebrew, letters can be read from left to right or right to left, producing opposite meanings. If *will* is read from right to left toward *love*, it means destruction, extinction. But if read from *love* to *will*, it means to keep walking, to go. The cosmic law conveyed here is that if we go from love to will, we are all right and safe, but if we try to go from will to love, we are destroying the opportunity to manifest a