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*Reproducible pages are in italics.*

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# 1 Engaged Teaching

Excellent teachers don't develop full-blown at graduation; nor are they just "born teachers." Instead, teachers are always in the process of "becoming." They continually discover who they are and what they stand for, through their dialogue with peers, through ongoing and consistent study, and through deep reflection about their craft.

—Sonia Nieto

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## *Self-Reflection*

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Who were the teachers who inspired you? How did they inspire you? What specific qualities, behaviors, and dispositions did they possess? Now think of your own students. How would they describe you? What kind of teacher do you aspire to be?

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Our society often focuses on the idealized teachers—like the ones characterized in the feature films *Freedom Writers*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Dead Poets Society*—the teachers who go to extraordinary lengths or give up their health or well-being to meet their students' needs. These messages give us the impression that great teachers are born, not made, that we must have a particular kind of charisma to inspire young people, or that exemplary teachers must make enormous sacrifices against impossible odds to reach their students.

Think about the teachers who inspired you. Perhaps these teachers taught you something important, changed your perspective about school or life, recognized your gifts, sparked a love for a subject, or inspired you to push past self-limiting beliefs. Perhaps they had a great sense of humor or exuded a contagious passion for their subject matter. Perhaps they were thoughtful and took your ideas seriously. Maybe they had a firm but caring attitude that kept you afloat when you experienced difficulty.

The premise of this book is that effective, authentic teaching *can* be learned, developed, and practiced over time in ways that positively impact students and dramatically enhance our own experience as educators. To do this, we do not have to be "super teachers" or adopt a persona or charismatic style that might not be our own. Nor do we have to drain ourselves. Instead, sustaining an authentic teaching practice is about each of us discovering our own unique gifts, building on our strengths, learning from others, and engaging in lifelong learning. It is about cultivating our best qualities, nurturing ourselves as teachers,

raising our level of self-awareness, managing our stress, fostering meaningful relationships with students, and connecting or reconnecting with our passion for teaching.

## The Roots of the Engaged Teaching Approach

The Engaged Teaching Approach is not a prescriptive or linear process, but rather a lifelong learning journey. This approach involves becoming a reflective practitioner, studying our own experiences, learning from successes and mistakes, cultivating social and emotional intelligence, and developing a deep understanding of what effective teaching looks and feels like. Whether we are veteran teachers or have just entered the field, in the Engaged Teaching Approach, we simply start where we are.

“Of all the professional forms of work I have seen, teaching is the most difficult. . . . Doctors are prepared for thirteen years for the work they do. We try to prepare teachers in one year, in many cases, and then drop them into very difficult challenges, give them little sustained development and then we wonder why teaching is so difficult.”

—Lee S. Shulman

In the introduction of this book, we used the metaphor of a tree to describe the Engaged Teaching Approach. In this chapter, we will continue with this metaphor and delve deeper into the view that underlies it. We have identified five major roots of the Engaged Teaching Approach—each represents a fundamental aspect of the approach (see figure I.2, page 6). Together, these roots support a holistic view of teaching and learning that empowers and sustains teachers and effectively prepares students for the complexities of the 21st century. These roots also directly support and inform the trunk (the principles and practices) and branches (the intermediate and long-term outcomes) of the Engaged Teaching Approach.

These five foundational roots are:

1. Integrating social, emotional, and academic learning
2. Investing in relationships and community
3. Responding to cultural contexts
4. Fostering connection, meaning, and purpose
5. Addressing developmental stages

### *Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning*

Brain research and learning theory illustrate that social, emotional, and academic learning are inseparable and that integrating these aspects of learning helps students succeed in school and life (Durlak et al., 2011). Professor Emeritus and author Robert Sylwester (1995) writes, “We know that emotion is very important to the educative process because it drives attention, which drives learning and memory” (p. 72). Figure 1.1 shows this progression. Even if our only focus is on meeting academic goals, we still need to foster social and emotional skills and capacities in ourselves and our students to achieve the academic results we desire.

Addressing young people’s social, emotional, and ethical lives is an immediate, pressing, and urgent need. . . . The definition of a well-educated person is one who possesses an education of the heart and spirit as well as the mind.

—Linda Lantieri

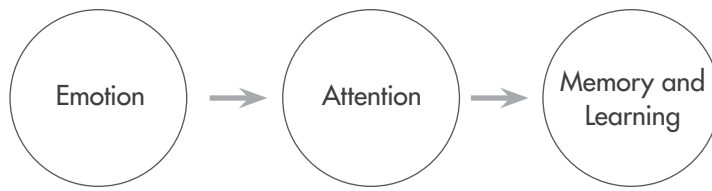


Figure 1.1: Robert Sylwester’s progression of emotions and learning.

## Investing in Relationships and Community

Learning does not happen in a vacuum, but rather in a very particular context. When we work conscientiously to build trusting relationships and to acknowledge and respond to cultural contexts, we foster our students’ capacity to learn and grow. When we invest in community building and create a healthy “container” for learning, we simultaneously foster student safety and resilience. Academic excellence is inextricably tied to the development of caring relationships (teacher-student and student-student). For this reason, taking the time and space to cultivate an intentional and positive learning environment is essential to achieving academic outcomes and school safety (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). When we invest in relationships and utilize effective strategies to engage students, staff, families, and community members, we directly impact students’ learning and well-being.

“Our ability to learn has deep roots in relationships. Our learning performance may be deeply affected by the emotional environment in which the learning takes place.”

—Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Sandi Everlove

## Responding to Cultural Contexts

Culture is the water we swim in, the air we breathe, the lens we see through. Students and teachers come into the classroom with a particular understanding based on their cultural context and background. When we acknowledge the role of culture (including access to resources and other issues related to equity), we are better able to identify, value, and respond to the multiple identities and cultures present in our schools. As Gloria Ladson-Billings writes:

“Recognizing that everyone has unique traditions, values, and beliefs that are important to them helps us see how we are connected.”

—Kim Kennedy White

Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures. (as cited in Benitez et al., 2009, p. 324–325)

Fostering cultural responsiveness—in ourselves and our students—is key to meeting academic goals, addressing inequities, and creating inclusive, engaged learning communities. Teachers who recognize the importance of culture often discover powerful opportunities to engage students. But teachers also must be aware of how they unconsciously express culture and how this impacts their students. The authors of *Cultural Identity*

and Teaching assert that “coming to an understanding of the ways in which one’s beliefs, experiences, values, and assumptions are linked to culture is an essential feature of culturally responsive practice” (White, Zion, Kozleski, & Equity Alliance at ASU, 2005, p. 2). As we become more aware of our own cultural lens, we are better able to respond to the multiplicity of cultures present in our classroom. As research shows, teachers who include culturally responsive practice and cultivate safety, belonging, inclusion, and equitable treatment among their students more readily engage and motivate students (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

### Fostering Connection, Meaning, and Purpose

“As teachers, we can honor our students’ search for what they believe gives meaning and integrity to their lives, and how they can connect to what is most precious for them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people can discover what is essential in their own lives and in life itself, and what allows them to bring their own gifts to the world.”

—Rachael Kessler

According to a report by the Commission on Children at Risk (Kline, 2003), the brain is hardwired to connect. *Connectedness* not only refers to connections to other people, but also to deep connections to values and meaning. Fostering a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection in the classroom is directly related to teaching and learning outcomes. When students have a sense of purpose and feel connected to themselves, their teachers, their peers, and the larger community, they are more resilient, compassionate, and motivated. They are more likely to care about their schoolwork and make healthy choices in school and in their personal lives.

Students are yearning for more connection at school—to feel seen, known, and understood. Without this sense of connection, students are much more likely to disengage, check out, become apathetic, or turn to risky behaviors. When the level of connection is shallow and the majority of learning does not feel relevant, students are unmotivated, and as a result often do not excel academically. Studies show that “approximately 40 to 60 percent of high school students become chronically disengaged from school” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3). Connection is fundamental to academic excellence, academic success, and *resilience*—the capacity for students to work with challenge and manage adversity. As Kessler notes in a 1999 article in *Educational Leadership*:

Students who feel deeply connected don’t need danger to feel fully alive. They don’t need guns to feel powerful. They don’t want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grows compassion and passion—passion for people, for students’ goals and dreams, for life itself. (p. 53)

One key way we can help students connect is with activities that specifically address the inner lives of students. In this book, we define *inner life* as the essential aspect of human nature that yearns for deep connection (to self, others, the community, and the world), grapples with questions of meaning and purpose, seeks genuine forms of self-expression, and longs to learn and grow. The inner life includes our thoughts, beliefs, emotions, questions, wonder, intuition, hopes, dreams, visions, creative impulses, ethical and moral leanings, and deepest longings for connection. The inner life also includes our innate curiosity that, when activated and engaged, naturally leads to a willingness and desire to learn and

contribute. It is essential to support the inner life in school and to connect the inner life with the outer life. The Engaged Teaching Approach supports the inner and outer lives of both students and teachers.

## Addressing Developmental Stages

Individuals and groups of students naturally progress through stages of development that directly relate to and impact learning. One aspect of addressing the developmental stages of individuals and groups involves paying attention to students' changing developmental needs (individually and as a group) throughout the arc of the school term or year. Bringing this awareness to our teaching practice can help us identify the activities and practices that are effective for students during particular stages of development. An activity that might build trust halfway through the school year might be too risky in September.

A second aspect of addressing students' developmental needs involves providing support and guidance for students during the "transition years" into and out of elementary, middle, and high school (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008). If students are experiencing a significant transition that is not directly addressed (such as the shift from elementary to middle school), they may be left to grapple with the complex feelings and issues associated with this shift on their own, and this may interfere with their capacity to learn. When we directly and intentionally address developmental stages and transitions (through curriculum, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and transitions or SEL programs), we support student learning and help them make healthy choices, avoid risky behaviors, experience the relevance of their academic work, and stay in school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

“At an absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunities to earn a living wage . . . . Yet, with little notice, the United States is allowing a dangerously high percentage of students to disappear from the educational pipeline before they graduate from high school.”

—Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen,  
Johanna Wald, and  
Christopher Swanson

## The Origins of Engaged Teaching

The Engaged Teaching Approach includes the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of many educators and field experts. The seed of this approach first originated with the collaborative work of Rachael Kessler (1946–2010)—visionary educator, author, and founder of the PassageWorks Institute. Over the course of twenty-five years, Kessler worked with colleagues and K–12 educators across the United States to develop an approach that welcomed the inner life of students and teachers into schools. Kessler's groundbreaking book *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School* (2000a) offers a unique and powerful perspective on the purpose and practice of education and has been used as a text in universities throughout the United States since its publication.

“We can have the best curricula available, train teachers in technique and theory, but our students will be unsafe and our programs hollow if we do not provide opportunities for teachers to develop their own souls, their hearts, their own social and emotional intelligence.”

—Rachael Kessler