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## In search of engagement

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# About the Author



**Kathryn Driver** is a Dean of the Middle School with particular oversight over Year 9 in 2020. She has an MA in History and is interested in the teaching of History for the purposes of fostering critical thinking, developing empathy and exploring the formation of identity. She was responsible for co-leading a Project Group set up to consider best practice in pastoral care as Barker moves towards comprehensive coeducation. She has recently participated in a review of Barker's behaviour management policies and practices, with a view to equipping teachers to promote student engagement.

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## Abstract

We are all searching for that utopian classroom where the students are engaged, learning is taking place and progress is palpable. It is clear that we are not consistently achieving this as many students in Australian classrooms are currently disengaged. While classrooms are complex and teachers are diverse, research reveals that positive relationships are the key to engagement. These relationships are fostered when teachers know their students and when they make an effort to create optimistic, productive and predictable environments. Strong, warm relationships are particularly important for girls whose disengagement can look less threatening than for boys and often goes unnoticed. The way forward is for teachers to know and to care.

## The Ideal Classroom

Picture this. An orderly classroom, chairs and tables in neat rows. Students alternating between furious scribbling of notes and furrowed brows of concentration as weighty morsels are disseminated. A teacher with greying hair holding court, model of an atom in one hand, smartboard pen in the other – remarkable not only for her encyclopedic knowledge, but also for her deft oscillation between old and new technologies. Is this the engaged classroom?

Picture this. A classroom that emits a buzz, chairs and tables of different shapes and colours in various combinations. Some students assembling a medieval castle in groups, others sitting singly on the lounges taking in the greenery through large windows as they compose their odes to the Sultan Saladin. A sprightly young teacher moving between clumps of students, nodding here, asking questions there – remarkable not only for his swift assessment of student progress but also for his facilitation of discussion and debate. Is this the engaged classroom?

We are all searching for engagement from our students, the reason being that students who are engaged are students who are learning. But this is sometimes an elusive goal: difficult to perceive, difficult to measure and difficult to sustain.

## (Dis?) Engagement in Australian Classrooms

According to a report produced by the Grattan Institute, as many as 40% of Australian students are unproductive in a given year. The key indicators of this are not highly disruptive behaviours but more minor behavioural issues, like talking out of turn or persistent lateness to class and compliant disengagement. The report goes on to state that these students are one to two years behind their peers in terms of academic progress – regardless of whether they are disruptive or compliant (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). Additionally, those students who are compliant are (predictably) best at masking their disengagement. They may work slowly, intermittently or not at all, but are not enough of a problem to draw attention.

Disengagement not only has an impact on students, but also on teachers who can become very anxious and despondent when the one thing they are looking to foster – a classroom of engaged students – appears unattainable. One NSW trial found no relationship between years of teaching experience and student engagement (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017), so this probably affects more teachers than might be imagined and certainly affects all of us at some point. Teachers might respond by resorting to punitive measures on a more regular basis – a method that has its place, but does not win students to the cause. Teachers can also respond in more destructive ways - with aggression, sarcasm or withdrawal.

Everyone loses when students are disengaged.

## **The Key to Engagement**

The worst advice I ever received as a teacher was, 'Don't smile before Easter'. This encouraged a desire to become the archetypal teacher that existed in my mind – one with supreme knowledge of my subject, ultimate confidence in my newfound role and all available disciplinary strategies at my disposal, ready to wield when required. However, it did not promote the desire to get to know my students, to ask them about their lives outside the classroom door, to let them into my world a little or to show them a humanity and even vulnerability that binds us to each other. And, without romanticising this notion any further, current research indicates that relationship is the key to engagement and, indeed, learning.

The Grattan Institute reports that, 'Students who have a good relationship with their teacher tend to succeed at school'. It goes on to suggest that, in order to reduce behavioural problems in the classroom, The first step is that teachers must know their students (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). A document produced by the Californian Department of Education stated that in the midst of competing teacher priorities, 'Establishing trusting, warm relationships is paramount' (O'Malley and Austin 2014). US staff trainer, Marieke van Woerkom, offers this advice to teachers: 'Get to know your students... The stronger the relationship and the better we understand our students, the more knowledge and goodwill we have to draw on when the going gets tough' (van Woerkom 2018). A study that emerged from UNSW about the impact of teacher-student relationships on student engagement concluded that: 'Students are more academically engaged when they are positively connected with their teachers. Each additional positive relationship with a teacher was associated with greater academic engagement by way of participation, enjoyment and aspirations' (Martin and Collie 2018). A similar study honing in on girls' disengagement added that 'When girls feel more connected to their teachers and peers, they feel more included in the classroom and, as a result, may be less likely to disengage' (Burns, Bostwick, Collie and Martin 2019).

## **Tools of Engagement**

The evidence is overwhelming and the application is simple: get to know your students. Understand how they work, what they like, what they are good at and what their deficits are. This will reap rewards in terms of engagement, it will support students socially and emotionally, it will give them the best chance of making progress academically and it will promote hopeful and aspirational thinking.

While it is a simple and natural task to relate to others, this is made much more difficult by the complex nature of a classroom which contains 20 or more very different human beings whose natural inclinations will vary from those who love to learn to those who love to subvert to those who are experiencing difficulties they are hiding beneath the surface. Here are some tools that might be helpful as we strive to make connections and prevent disengagement:

#### For school leaders:

- Prioritise the communication of effective teaching strategies that lead to a positive classroom climate and an engaged student body in teacher induction programs.
- Promote opportunities for teacher observation and collaboration including the use of mentors who can pass on strategies that have been tried and tested.
- Listen to students as we seek to understand what matters to them and include them in crafting school rules for the purposes of 'building community norms that preserve learning time' (O'Malley and Austin 2014).
- Produce a coherent, transparent and achievable Behaviour Management Plan that is widely disseminated and universally adopted.

#### For school teachers:

- 'The teacher's ambition should not necessarily be a quiet class but a genuinely productive class' (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). This is a classroom that feels comfortable, where students can be confident, where participation is not only the norm but an expectation, where mistakes are made without fear and where students are challenged to go beyond their previous limits.
- Teachers should focus not just on teaching their subject content but on teaching behaviours for learning. Research shows that 'teachers tend to reserve praise for good work rather than good behaviour' (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). Perhaps instead we could focus on exhibiting model student behaviours that promote learning.
- Teachers should share classroom expectations and develop classroom norms collaboratively. This fosters student ownership of their behaviour and communal adherence to shared standards.
- Teachers should have high expectations of student success, understanding that different students will progress at different rates and achieve different markers. Success breeds confidence which breeds motivation which breeds further success.
- Teachers should inculcate not only positive teacher-student relationships, but also positive relationships within the student body. This ensures a level of trust that encourages debate, disagreement and the ability to fail in order to learn.
- Teachers should strive for clarity in their instructions and structure in their lessons. This should not hamper the element of surprise, spontaneity and fun, but ensures that routines which give students security are preserved.
- Teachers should promote student participation as a significant factor in their engagement. 'The more opportunities students have to respond in class, the more likely they are to learn well' (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017).
- Teachers should assign work that is 'important, significant and interesting' and provide 'clear feedback on how they can improve' (Martin and Collie 2018). Students, just like teachers, want to know they are doing something worthwhile and want to know how to reach their goals.
- Teachers should offer consistent encouragement and praise to their students. This is best when it is specific and, especially, when it is genuine. Students can see right through hollow praise.

- Teachers should offer consistent consequences and corrections to their students. Warnings give students the opportunity to self-correct and remind them of expectations, but teachers should act quickly, if needed, to follow through on consequences. These consequences may include utilising a formal disciplinary system but it may also (with potentially greater effect) be dealt with immediately in a manner appropriate to the misdemeanour. A teacher who responds well to misbehaving students encourages good behaviour from others.

### **Does Gender Make a Difference?**

Research suggests that, in general, students become more disengaged in high school (Burns, Bostwick, Collie and Martin 2019). However, this research has also focused more on boys because they tend to disengage in ways that are more overt – through disruptive classroom behaviours. However, disengagement in high school is also an issue for girls. And, concerningly, because their disengagement is more likely to present as quiet, compliant underachievement, this has not been as assiduously investigated or combatted.

According to Burns, Bostwick, Collie and Martin (2019), disengagement among girls can take the form of self-handicapping (where students sabotage their chance of success by avoiding work) or failure-acceptance (where students actively stop participating in classroom activities).

The key to tackling disengagement among girls is to bolster their social support. In other words, teachers need to foster relationships with them and relationships between them and their peers. It has been found that teacher support when girls transitioned into high school was a significant buffer against disengagement, while peer support did not play a major role in this regard (Burns, Bostwick, Collie and Martin 2019).

The key recommendations of a study by UNSW educators were: "listening to girls' opinions and ideas in the classroom" and "showing interest in and asking about girls' hobbies and extra-curricular activities" (Burns, Bostwick, Collie and Martin 2019). This shows the significance of a relational approach when it comes to engaging girls and this should be at the forefront of our minds as Barker College transitions to full coeducation by 2022.

### **The Final Word**

What is the ideal classroom? Perhaps it is always best to leave the final word to a student. When I asked a Year 9 student this question earlier in the year, he said: 'I love my Maths class.' Why? 'Because my teacher cares about me.'

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