# 1. INTRODUCTION

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All students need to be engaged in learning—not just the interested students, not just the ones who are obedient. The figures for those leaving school without a meaningful qualification, and our truancy and discipline rates all tell us we need to do better. The push for all students to succeed in learning can seem like a daunting challenge. But it is also exciting, because it gets us thinking about learning; what it is, and how it "works".

The student engagement conferences, held in Wellington and Auckland, did not provide mechanical recipes—there is no such thing. So much of learning is a form of interaction: particular individuals interacting with curriculum materials and with teachers and the learner's peers and family.

That is why the image of "engagement" is very useful in thinking about learning. It is an *active* image, for both learners and teachers. Not the famed "empty vessels" into which knowledge is poured, nor "couch potatoes" who pick up understanding through watching or being entertained.

*Student engagement* is a relatively new term in New Zealand. Thinking back over the 20 years since the Tomorrow's Schools reforms, I remember debates about access, and the dominance of the idea that students needed to be ready for school, that it was they who had to adjust to the environment. Pastoral care was seen as something completely separate from learning. I also recall research that focused on "time on task" as a measure of learning. I think we have moved quite a distance since then in our understanding of the need to engage students in learning, both for their and our sake, and in our measurement of learning. People are now much more aware of the fact that students are a diverse group, with different students having different learning needs. We now know it is not enough to simply open doors and encourage entrance.

The conference gave us the opportunity to think about student engagement in learning. What fosters it? What hinders it? What does this mean for teaching? What does it mean for how we organise our schools if student engagement is a prime criterion? What does this mean for "pastoral" care—ensuring that students feel that what they do matters to someone? What does it mean for the curricula we offer? What does it mean for how we assess?

To counter disengagement, we need to think systematically and over time about how we use information about student engagement and respond to it. And we need to hear the student voice.

At the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), some of what we know about student engagement has come from the longitudinal Competent Children, Competent Learners project. This has tracked a group of children from 1993, when they were nearly five and in Wellington-based early childhood education, to the present day. Our latest findings are from the age-16 phase of the research.

In that study, we see most children start school all bright eyed and bushy tailed. The turning away from school doesn't start to really be noticeable until age eight, when it begins to happen for those students who haven't experienced early success in literacy and numeracy. We have observed some patterns that are relevant to student engagement:

- Age-16 student engagement levels are linked to school attendance, National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) achievement, teachers' perceptions of student behaviour and attitudes (or key competencies).

- Engagement levels reflect past as well as present development of "learning identities" and habits.

- In terms of overall engagement levels, the biggest drop is between ages 12 to 14—as students enter adolescence.

- By the age of 16, 36 percent are usually or always bored; 8 percent rarely or never.

- Twenty-nine percent rarely or only occasionally enjoy learning.

- Twenty-five percent wanted to leave school as soon as they could, or had left school.

Feeling comfortable or safe at school—or what we call feeling "affirmed at school"—is different from engagement in school: enjoying learning, not often feeling restless or bored, or wanting to leave school as soon as possible. Feeling affirmed and being engaged in school are correlated, but they are also distinct. You can feel affirmed by school and still be involved in some quite risky behaviour that will undermine your engagement with learning at school. So providing a safe and comfortable environment for diverse students—which is important because it is also linked to useful attitudes to teachers—is not enough to ensure engagement in school and its work.

Engagement in school is more likely with positive learning environments. We know this from the questions we asked Competent Children, Competent Learners participants about their most and least enjoyed classes at age 16.

Teachers of the most enjoyed classes said they:

- use group activities and discussion, which includes activities of interpretation and articulation

- allow students to have input into the context and direction of learning activities

- use practical activities
- allow students to act on issues that concern them
- have fun with the class.

Students said that in their most enjoyed classes:
- teachers are interested in their ideas
- teachers understand how they feel about things
- teachers provide scaffolded support—building on student interests, using relevant examples
- teachers are fair
- teachers are clear
- they can see connections with the outside world
- they have practical activities.

Engagement is about building motivation and helping students develop their learning identity. The conference explored what systems are needed to frame teaching and learning in ways that engage more students than we would have thought possible 20 years ago, and in ways that pull back in those who are on the edges of engagement.

Student engagement is not an end in itself. But in the process of exploring student engagement, it is possible to find out more about what students need to learn, which will help us focus on how to bring their energy into the classroom, to improve learning outcomes.