

Ellin Oliver Keene



Engaging Children

Igniting a Drive for Deeper Learning K–8

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For Tom Newkirk,
who first invited me to write and has
been my north star ever since.
Beloved editor, mentor, friend.



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Prelude

Ricky was doing his best to be invisible in a room with fourteen adults and twenty-one other sixth graders. He was reading (not) in a corner created by a filing cabinet and the wall, in the furthest reaches of the classroom. I had my eye on him and occasionally, he had his eye on me. I could almost hear him thinking, “Please don’t notice me. Please, please, please don’t ask me to confer with you like you’re doing with all those other kids.” I conferred with a couple of students and, between conferences, walked around to observe the students reading (or not). Once again, I had my eyes on Ricky.

Ricky was a pretty skilled fake reader and he had a couple of other acts going: He was actually recording pages “read” in a reading log (yet another reason why reading logs may not be our best option to keep readers accountable), and he stuck a couple of Post-its in a page here and there but wrote nothing on them. He was quiet, disturbed no one, held his book, turned a page, looked around, and moments later, turned the page, stuck on another Post-it, and on and on it went. Ricky had perfected the fine art of looking engaged. He appeared to be attentive in groups and while reading independently. He had internalized the secret of blending into the woodwork. I wonder if he has ever read a book.

Sound at all familiar? Let’s be honest; all of us—adults and children—“check out” sometimes to regain our cognitive bearings or daydream, perhaps to make a list or send a text, we respond to an email we’ve been avoiding, we force ourselves to move on with a menial task that must get done. Most of these are healthy distractions—they give us a brain break. And, most of us are more than able to resume a task, take the next step, and refocus. We can do so eagerly or begrudgingly, but we step back to the work at hand.

Now let’s think about “time on task,” an overused term if ever there was one. I remember one of my principals talking about the need to increase students’ time on task. If students appeared busy when he walked in, that was time on task. Ricky would have appeared “on task” to anyone who merely glanced his way. Time on task has become such an overvalued commodity, the term itself is bleached of meaning. As you well know, there are even teacher appraisal processes in which the observer counts the number of students who appear “on task” at a given time. But clearly, time on task does not equal engagement, and it’s important to discern the difference. Time on task is not what this book is about. It’s about true engagement, a sensation that is almost intoxicating

and far from the superficial attention Ricky was giving to his reading. I have seen too many students like Ricky—and likely, you have as well. I realized that it was time to take on the question of what engagement *is*, what it means to learners, and how we can help Ricky and so many others experience it much more.

Engagement, as I'll argue throughout this book, is characterized by feeling lost in a state that causes us, on one hand to forget the world around us, to become fully engrossed. On the other hand, when engaged, we enter into a state of wide-awakeness that is almost blissful. We want to dig more deeply into our reading or listening or learning or taking action; we allow emotions to roll over us; we're eager to talk with others about an idea—we're even aware of how extraordinary or beautiful those moments are. I wonder if Ricky has ever been engaged.

We adults know what it feels like to be truly engaged—it's intoxicating—and we work vigorously to return to that state. I wonder, though, do we expect students to be engaged? Some days we are relieved if they are merely compliant! Have we come to accept that engagement isn't for all students? Do we doubt our ability to increase student engagement? Have we become so overwhelmed by *what* we teach—checking off one standard after another—that we have forgotten that engaged students are much more likely to retain and reapply that content? Do we believe that students can learn to fall into the state of awareness, focus, intensity, and joy that we value so much for ourselves?

Our ideas about engagement were formed in early childhood by our parents, and have been solidified by what our teachers did to “motivate” us. In classrooms now, many of these old notions are concretized by what our colleagues believe about motivation and engagement. In nearly every conversation I've had about this topic, colleagues seem to believe that we are the ones responsible for getting kids excited about learning. It's *our* job to motivate them. Really? In this book, I want to rethink this conventional wisdom and push toward a new way to define engagement and our role when it comes to *motivating* another human being. We'll focus on how we can define, model, and discuss engagement so that students become increasingly able to engage themselves. We'll look closely at times when we have been deeply engaged and extrapolate from those experiences to consider what our students most



need. And, we'll explore the classroom conditions students need to engage at school and, importantly, to seek engagement in their lives outside of school.

Engaging Children: Igniting a Drive for Deeper Learning, K–8 is about helping all students experience true engagement for increasing amounts of time each day. Together, we will tackle what I believe to be a very important question: Can engagement be *taught*? If we believe that it can, what does that teaching look like? We'll also explore the questions listed in the sidebar.

In *Engaging Children*, we will examine the conditions that lead to engagement. We will focus on the age-old question about what ignites the drive to learn. If you struggle with questions on how to get kids excited about and responsible for their own learning, you're far from alone. Sometimes, our desperation around these quandaries (often focused on children who are more reluctant learners) leads us to offer external incentives to get kids to read more, inquire more deeply into a topic of interest, pursue academic interests outside of school, and so on. We have decades of research to show that external incentives don't work and are actually disincentives with respect to helping students develop the energy and engagement that comes from passion for a topic or a book.

We need an alternative—one in which we notice moments of engagement, label them, model our own engagement, and discuss engagement explicitly with students.

I want you to join me in delving into this question: What can I do to help students develop intrinsic motivation or, better yet, engagement? At the core of this book is an exploration of the ways we can promote student-driven engagement through discourse and modeling. I will show how we can help students take more responsibility for their own learning and engagement.

We'll begin this journey in Chapter 1 by contrasting four behaviors and modes of thinking that are often confused: compliance (I'm doing

Questions this book will address:

- How can educators facilitate engagement for all rather than accepting that some kids just seem more engaged than others?
- Is it up to us to keep up a song and dance to sustain kids' attention all day?
- How can we serve as models of intellectual and emotional engagement?
- How do we help a child engage when he or she is taciturn and resistant?
- How might we turn over responsibility for engagement to students? Can they choose to engage?
- How do we help children engage and reengage without the use of external reinforcements?
- How do we show trust in students to find their own way into engagement?
- How do we integrate modeling and discussion about engagement with students and colleagues into our already packed days of teaching and learning?

it because I'm told to), participation (I'm going along with the crowd, doing an assignment), external and internal motivation (I'm doing this for something or someone else), and true engagement (I want to do this for myself and in service to others). In Chapters 2 and 3, we'll do some side-by-side thinking about our own engaging experiences and explore ways to begin the conversation about engagement with students. We'll hear directly from students who have felt a sense of deep engagement and learn from their wise advice about how teachers can create the conditions for engagement in classrooms.

In Chapter 4, I'll tackle a new definition for engagement, one that goes beyond traditional notions of getting kids motivated. It provides four pillars we can use to assess our students' engagement and help them become more independent in seeking engagement on their own. The pillars of engagement are:

- intellectual urgency
- emotional resonance
- perspective bending
- the aesthetic world

Chapters 5–8 will focus in depth on each of the four pillars of engagement and, importantly, will allow you to think about them in the four major literacy workshop settings:

- intellectual urgency in whole-class work
- emotional resonance in conferences
- perspective bending in small-group work
- the aesthetic world in individual work and reflection

Certainly any of the pillars of engagement can happen in any workshop setting, but this structure will give us an opportunity to look at some examples of engagement building in progress!

Before we go on, let me acknowledge something you may have been thinking: The four components of engagement I propose have a great deal to do with *attention*. Not time on task—real attention. I've read about and been told that actual sustained attention seems ever rarer in our society. I occasionally worry that I'm unable to attend with the same energy as I could years ago. Do you worry about that? Is it the rapidity with which images change on screens, the frenzied nature of our lives inside and outside of school, the urgency with which we feel we must teach to get it all in that's causing

us to lose attention? If *we* experience such distractions and find it hard to focus, what must children experience? It can feel like sustained attention is an almost unattainable outcome—for us, for our students.

French philosopher Simone Weil said, “The highest ecstasy is attention at its fullest” (Weil 1952, 76–78). To me, these simple and profound words imply that we must try to learn or relearn the illusive art of attention, what I’ll call *engagement*. We owe it to students to take them along. We humans need the luxury of time to engage: to think; to discuss; to wonder; to be in awe; to pursue new understanding; to puzzle through complex problems. All are threads in the tapestry in of engagement. It is my hope in the coming chapters to show how we might recapture the art of engagement.

You may be drawn to wonder if all kids can be engaged all (or nearly all) of the time. My response to the first part of the question—all kids—is an unequivocal yes. I’ll defer to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychologist, philosopher, and educator William James for a possible response to the second.

One often hears it said that genius is nothing but a power of sustained attention, and the popular impression probably prevails that men of genius are remarkable for their voluntary powers in this direction. *But a little introspective observation will show any one that voluntary attention cannot be continuously sustained—that it comes in beats.* When we are studying an uninteresting subject, if our mind tends to wander, we have to bring back our attention every now and then by using distinct pulses of effort, which revivify the topic for a moment, the mind then running on for a certain number of seconds or minutes with spontaneous interest, until again some intercurrent idea captures it and takes it off. (1958, 79)

So see? Don’t worry! If your mind wanders, it doesn’t mean you’re less engaged. As James reminds us, “we have to bring back our attention . . . by using distinct pulses of effort. . . .” It is this notion—that we are capable of reigniting or initiating engagement or attention—that intrigues me the most in James’ words. If by exerting “distinct pulses of effort” we can become attentive or engaged, surely this must be something we can discuss with students.

The appendices provide practical tools for you and your students to find the language to discuss engagement and to assess the degree to which students are engaged.

I want *Engaging Children* to be a book that walks its talk. My hope is that you and your colleagues will dig into the book in study groups, use Twitter chats, and participate

in a Facebook page created especially for this book (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/EngagingChildren/>). My greatest wish is for each reader to interact (in person and online) with other teachers who are reading the book. I hope you feel engaged as you read and are able to bend one another's perspectives about what it means to be engaged.

It's been months since I was in Ricky's classroom, but I'm still thinking about him. I hope he is reading a book that captures his thinking, his emotions, his beliefs, and his sense of awe (the four pillars of engagement). I hope that he isn't fake reading anymore and that he hasn't moved on to more disruptive behaviors, as too often happens with disengaged kids. I hope Ricky has come out of the shadows and is immersed in discussion with his classmates and teachers about conflicts and challenges as well as the beauty of the world into which he was born.

If you can't wait to see what this looks like, get started now!! Think about your current students through the engagement lens by pausing to consider these questions:

1. How do you know when your class is engaged during whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, conferring, and/or when you're standing back to observe?
2. What are your concerns about student engagement?
3. Under what conditions do you find yourself deeply engaged?
4. Do you talk to your students about their engagement (or lack thereof)?
How do you approach this topic with them?

Share your thoughts with colleagues near you and on the Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/EngagingChildren>

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Let Me Entertain You!

Liberty of thought is the life of the soul.

—VOLTAIRE

A pie in the face: What does it take to motivate?

“They love it. I’ve done it for ten years now. They wait all year for this day.”

“It’s so motivating! How many books did they read this year?”

“Over ten thousand!”

“Just great. What time is the pie throwing?”

“Three o’clock.”

“Great. I’ll have the district’s film crew there.”

I admit it. I was eavesdropping. Seated in a conference room working on curriculum, I listened surreptitiously to a conversation between a principal and the district superintendent, who were standing just outside our door in the central office building. It

was late spring, and they were jovial; the kids at a nearby elementary school were filled with anticipation, a camera crew on the way. The students had met their reading goal for the year and a fifth grader had been chosen to throw a pie at the principal. It's so motivating!

Motivation. It has so much to do with whether kids choose to read. Doesn't it? Surely, every time a child picked up a book to read that year, he or she anticipated the moment, months hence, when the principal would wipe the banana cream pie out of his eyes and shake his head, flinging bits of meringue all over the playground. It's why a first grader tentatively opened her first chapter book. The unbearable anticipation led a fifth grader to pile a stack of informational texts about the shrinking polar ice cap next to his desk in October—he was thinking about helping his school reach the ten-thousand-book threshold with its attendant pie throwing and pizza party. If there were an emoticon symbolizing dripping sarcasm, I'd enter it here.

I turned back to the teachers and literacy coaches with whom I was working. What did they think about this conception of motivating kids to read? Did they think that kids had been reading all year because of the promise of a pie in the principal's face? They were quick to respond. The literacy coach from the pie-throwing school mentioned that the principal was a good sport to do this every year and that the students adored him. She paused. "But I really think that what motivates kids to read are those little everyday moments when the light goes on," she said. "A child figures out how to pronounce new words in a picture book she loves; another loses himself in the complex plot line of a fantasy novel or shares insights about a book with other readers. Those moments," she told us, "seem to make the most difference. Those are the times when I see kids really start to lose themselves in books." She went on to talk about the pie-throwing tradition and how important it is to kids in her school.

Another teacher jumped in. "Then go ahead and do the pie throwing and let everyone die laughing as an end-of-the-year ritual, but don't tie it to reading!"

"I don't think we should do those kinds of things at all," another literacy coach said. "Why do we want to conflate humiliation with the person who is supposed to be the lead learner in the school? I'm all for the idea of ritual in a school, but what does the pie throwing have to do with someone who is supposed to be a model?"

I interjected with another question. "What do you think about setting goals like ten thousand books a year for kids?"

“I think it helps a lot,” another teacher said. “In our school, we keep charts outside every classroom to show our progress. Teachers point out which kids are reading the most books and helping to meet the goal.” I winced.

“Wait,” another teacher jumped in. “Aren’t we talking about how to intrinsically motivate kids? We want it to come from them, right? How does a chart or a pie in the face lead to intrinsic motivation?”

“Why can’t it be both?” another coach asked. “Why can’t we have the motivating pie throwing or whatever for the kids who get into that stuff and also reinforce the small moments when each child overcomes an obstacle or reads something that’s new and difficult for him?”

Why can’t it be both? Why can’t we encourage children to read for what we might call external incentives (like the pie-throwing event) as well as internal motives, such as feeling the drive to read more when they find that they can read fascinating text? It turns out that both are *not* better—internal and external motivation do not live in quiet harmony. More on that later in the chapter.

The common theme among the teachers and literacy coaches involved in that spontaneous conversation was that they all desperately wanted students to learn to read and love to read. Everyone understood that children must read for long and growing periods of time each day to become proficient. All were aware of the need to teach children to make wise book choices so that selecting challenging and interesting books becomes habitual. We all hoped that children would read in a wide variety of genres and for a wide range of purposes.

At the same time, we were all acutely aware that many children weren’t reading enough and that there was some confusion in their respective schools about how to address the problem. The group described faculty meetings and committees in which they brainstormed ways to motivate children to read more. Pies in the face. Points for pizza parties. Certificates. Posters on the wall that list each child in a class and a growing number of colored sticky dots showing how many books they’ve read.

The teachers and literacy coaches that day held widely varying beliefs about what it takes to “get kids to read.” What *does* motivate children to read and to learn in a wide range of content areas?

What do you think?

What motivates students to read and learn eagerly? Take a moment to share your thoughts with colleagues and read and respond to others’ ideas about motivation.

Rethinking Motivation

I've been thinking a lot about motivation in recent years. I've read research, collected articles from professional journals and newspapers, and attended conference sessions. A lot of people have something to say about what motivates others! If you just provide incentives, people will work like crazy to earn them goes the conventional wisdom. Think back to the *Freakonomics* (Levitt and Dubner 2009) craze. I heard one of the authors speak to an audience of teachers, urging them to incentivize everything they could in the classroom. Consider reading “programs” in wide use today where kids earn points toward incentives (like pizza parties) for reading and answering questions. A quick search on Amazon reveals 4,942 titles on motivating kids, many published in the past six years! There is certainly not a dearth of information on what it takes to motivate people!

I've been thinking that we need to rethink motivation. When I was a preservice teacher in what I like to call I-wanna-be-a-teacher school, I sat through many lectures focused on “motivating students” (oxymoron noted). I bought a supplemental text called something like *101 Ways to Motivate Your Students*. I couldn't understand why it wasn't called *185 Ways to Motivate . . .* because there were 185 days in the school year! I was passionate about teaching, had boundless energy, and believed that motivating my students would come easily to me. I understood that children needed to see reason and relevance for what they were doing and that they needed to be active. My mantra was “Learning should be fun!”

In my classroom, many days felt like a variety show lineup, and I was the one-woman show. I channeled Carol Burnett (am I the only one who remembers her show?). I tried to use positive feedback, reason, humor, a bit of drama, energy, and emotion to encourage kids to get involved in activities. Many jumped on board; some were “motivated.” Many participated. Others complied. (I didn't notice the difference between those three categories at the time.) A few did not bother. I lay awake at night and worried about those few and psyched myself up for even higher energy and more fun—more Carol Burnett. It was exhausting. Have you ever felt that way?

My school participated in many of the “pie in the principal's face” contests and rewards. I noticed that the already “motivated” kids got more excited; the participants and compliance seekers did as they were asked; and the few who didn't bother, well, they didn't bother. But the needle didn't budge for *any* of them. Topics taught in October

had evaporated from their memories by December. We didn't like the results, but didn't know what to do instead.

What *have* we learned about motivation? We'll return to this question throughout this book, but for now, we know, for example, that "there is evidence that motivation to read in the elementary and middle school years is related to reading achievement, with more proficient readers being more motivated and less proficient readers being less motivated" (Marinak and Gambrell 2016, 21). Hardly a surprise. Less proficient readers become less motivated, which leads to less reading, which leads to lower achievement, which leads to. . . .

Is it possible that *our efforts* to motivate students, though they come from the best intentions, could be falling flat? If we know that our efforts to reward desired behaviors aren't having an impact on the students about whom we're most concerned, should we continue them? And let's think about those efforts—just who is doing the heavy lifting here?

Let's go back to my conversation with the teachers and literacy coaches. One suggested that we try to stimulate both internal and external motivation. Why not? Shouldn't we try everything we can? Marinak and Gambrell caution, "In a classic study by Deci and his colleagues, the findings revealed that if you reward a student who enjoys reading with an extrinsic reward (such as points, food, or money) the student may choose to read less frequently once the incentive is discontinued" (Marinak and Gambrell 2016, 16–17). That makes sense to me. In a sense, the child becomes "hooked" on the extrinsic reward, doesn't develop an association with reading and pleasure, and has no clear reason to continue to read after the reward is discontinued. These authors also show that the further removed an "incentive" (a pie in the face or a principal on the roof) is from the desired behavior in time and in logical connection (for example, reading, but this applies to all learning), the less likely the incentive is to motivate. What does a pie-in-the-face event or a pizza party or a Cracker Jack prize have to do with reading? And is that end-of-year ritual really going to boost students' desire to pick up a book in October?

There is also a great deal of writing about motivation from outside education. A substantial number of studies in other fields bring insight about motivation to educators. In a 2014 op-ed in the *New York Times*, an organizational behavior professor from Yale and a psychology



professor at Swarthmore go further than Marinak and Gambrell to assert that internal and what they call *instrumental* (what we often refer to as *external*) motivation do *not* work well together. Professors Wrzesniewski and Schwartz acknowledge that most of us believe that having a combination of internal and instrumental motivation is preferable. They write, “Rendering an activity more attractive by emphasizing both internal and instrumental motives to engage in it is completely understandable, but may have the unintended effect of weakening the internal motives so essential for success” (SR9).

As I read these and dozens of other articles and books that explore the questions related to motivation, I began to notice a trend. Not always, but often when we educators and writers outside the field discuss motivation, we talk about something *someone does to or for someone else*. Incentives motivate workers. Teachers motivate children. In the classroom, motivation is often thought of as *our responsibility*. We need to form committees, take pies in the face, hang charts with sticky dots, and plan pizza parties to motivate children. In my own classroom, I certainly felt a need to deploy high energy all the time, even to be entertaining in order to motivate my students. Even when we are thinking about sparking internal motivation, we are still talking about what *we* can do to promote it.

Therein lies the dilemma, of course. If we accept the almost universal agreement that external motivation tactics fall far short, do we just stop trying to motivate kids?

And, where is the learner in all of this? At what point do we involve the learner in identifying what is motivating? What is a student’s role in motivating him- or herself? Can a six-year-old motivate herself? Can a disaffected adolescent gear up to engage in his own learning, or must *we* find ways to rev his engine? Do we just have to keep pedaling faster to try to win students away from more entertaining pursuits such as video games and social media? Who is doing the heavy lifting here?

Let’s look at the dictionary definition for a moment. *Motivate* is defined as “to incite or impel—syn. provoke, cause, propel.” It makes me wonder: Who incites? Who provokes? Who propels? Marinak and Gambrell (2016) define the motivation to read as “the likelihood of engaging in a reading task, and persisting in the activity despite challenges” (19). The likelihood of *engaging* in reading. Can we *make* a child engage? Don’t some children do this naturally, while others need to be incited or impelled to do so?

When I scrutinize the language often used to define and describe the “motivated” behaviors that we know relate to student achievement, I begin to wonder if we’re asking the wrong question. Is it really motivation we’re seeking for children? Is it our job to incite and impel? Perhaps we get a bit closer when we use Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) definition of intrinsic motivation, which he refers to as *flow*. He talks

about the experience of being so absorbed in an activity such as reading a great book that one loses the perception of place or of time passing. Closer, I think, but we are still left with the question of *how* we get to that state, especially when thinking about children who may find it difficult to be that absorbed in an activity. What about times when they become distracted?

■ Unintended Consequences in the Classroom

Meanwhile, back in the classroom . . . Throwing a pie at the principal is far from the only way we attempt to motivate children, particularly those about whom we're concerned. In fact, many of us hope that we'll motivate students by throwing around some praise, but such comments may have a lasting and deleterious impact on children. Consider these seemingly benign comments: "Oh my gosh, kids, Marcus just finished his thirteenth book this month. He is just eating these books up! Who else thinks they can beat his record?" Or, "Wow! Helen is reading a book with 450 pages! Amazing." Or, "Jacobi is such a fast reader. The faster you read, the more books you get to enjoy!" Every day, we may be delivering messages that have unintended consequences. One of the most frequent patterns in our spoken attempts to motivate children relates to the speed and quantity as opposed to the quality of their reading. I've heard each one of these statements and hundreds more that privilege fast reading and thick books over deep understanding, dwelling in ideas, and rereading to savor subtle details and discover more insight.

I also worry about the messages we give children through our assessment processes. I've had far too many conferences with children in which the first thing they tell me is that they aren't a good reader because they read too slowly. Many of these children can even tell me their most recent words-per-minute scores or their current "level" (a number children were never meant to know). When we repeatedly time children's oral reading, we are telling them in a not-so-subtle way that we value speed and accuracy over comprehension. To be sure, there may be a need to gauge some students' oral reading speed, but *only* those whose reading speed we suspect is preventing them from comprehending fully. We don't need to

I also invite you to explore questions with colleagues through the book's Facebook group (facebook.com/groups/EngagingChildren) as you read. I believe that our collective wisdom will be useful as you read.

gather words-per-minute speed data for the vast majority of children, and they certainly don't need to know that number! It's important to recognize the dampening effect such measurements can have on students' perceptions of themselves as able readers.

And don't get me started on leveling! Certainly, it helps to have a rough understanding of a child's *range* of levels, what Fountas and Pinnell call *text gradients*, when developing an *initial* understanding of a child's fluency and word identification, say, at the beginning of a school year. However, I cannot imagine a scenario in which a child is always bound to read within that level or one in which she knows what her level is and plods diligently through one level to get to the next and the next. The single most important factor influencing the readability of a particular text is the student's background knowledge for the text topic and the text structure. I won't take on the whole argument here about why text leveling has been misinterpreted (Fountas and Pinnell 2012) and carried far beyond its usefulness, but looking at leveling through the lens of motivation and engagement, I will suggest that it represents, in the most generous interpretation, yet another type of external motivation that won't help children develop a sense of what matters most in reading in the long run—learning new information about the natural and social world and losing themselves in great stories.

Let's look at some other potential unintended consequences of tasks we ask children to do. Think about reading logs for a moment. In thousands of American homes each night children set timers and quietly conclude that reading is mostly about the number of minutes one reads each day and that the reader has to count the minutes and the pages so that an adult can sign off. Also, often in the name of accountability, we still ask children to complete worksheets, respond to comprehension questions about the details in texts, write responses to reading day after day, and produce endless summaries that run dangerously close to the book reports of old. Of course, we need to understand children's thinking about books and gather formative assessment data, but the more routine and scheduled we make these tasks, the more children are likely to conclude that one reads *in order to report* rather than to immerse oneself deeply in the fictional lives of others and the endlessly fascinating natural and social world of informational texts. When they draw those conclusions, lack of engagement isn't far behind.

Wait a minute! Aren't some children motivated by knowing the specifics of their progression in words per minute, pages read, time spent, and levels crossed? Haven't we seen kids who thrive on the competition (even with themselves) implied in moving steadily through a range of leveled texts or in building their reading stamina? We have, and I am not going to suggest that we *never* use any of the quantifiable measures

to launch children as they build the habit and excitement we want them to have toward reading. But I believe we need to move them quickly toward building an internal sense of engagement with an emphasis on what they learn and enjoy as readers. We have to ask ourselves what the children who appear to thrive on external motivation really understand about the values we hold most steadfastly for them—not just today, this month, this school year, but into their future.

Distinguishing Between Compliance, Participation, Motivation, and Engagement

As I became more aware of the impact of motivation as an adult-driven phenomenon in classrooms, I began to notice, through casual observation in the classroom, that it is extraordinarily difficult to know if a child is “motivated.” For example, are the quiet children who work diligently really motivated? Are students working to complete group projects genuinely engaged with each other to explore a common question? And are those who work eagerly for incentives learning deeply and permanently? Are motivated-*appearing* students really delving into reading, writing, and learning about the world?

Let’s take a closer look at the small, but key differences among some of the terms that we throw around rather loosely—compliance, participation, motivation (internal and external), and engagement. There are some clear distinctions among them but also some almost imperceptible differences. It turns out that those subtle differences have a huge impact in the long run. I know this from very personal experience.

COMPLIANCE

I have so many images of compliant children in my mind. One of the first is my third-grade self. I loved my teacher, Miss Elyse Shackelford, and because my mother once taught with her, I had inside information about Miss Shackelford’s life. Miss Elyse and her sister, Miss Marvel (my fourth-grade math teacher) were unmarried, lived together, and had devoted their lives to teaching in Greeley, Colorado. I remember them with something just this side of a sense of pity; they were in their sixties when I was in school and they seemed very fragile to me. My mother told me stories of working with them and we were occasionally invited to their small home for a real Saturday afternoon tea,

complete with china and frilly little silver spoons. I was told, though I probably didn't have to be, that my mother had very high expectations for my behavior at those gatherings and in school. I was to show the Misses Shackelford great respect. They were very dear, she told me. I complied. And complied. I completed every task and did my homework carefully. I tried to say amusing things to them; I made cards and wrote thank-you notes.

Until one afternoon late in the third grade. I remember the time because I was wearing a new jumper with little metal clips at the shoulders that I loved to fiddle with. I must have been feeling a bit full of myself—naughty or perhaps a bit attention starved, because I decided to pretend that I had gum in my mouth, obviously a terrible infraction in my third-grade classroom. I chewed (nothing) in an exaggerated manner, determined to “get in trouble” and, I assume, get attention any way I could. Miss Elyse never noticed. I chomped on my cheek and my tongue all afternoon, jaws exhausted on my way

out of the classroom at the end of the day. I'll never know if she saw me, but I was the kid who never got in trouble (until sixth grade!) and if she noticed, she probably would have understood exactly what was going on and wisely decided to ignore me. I never “chewed gum” again. I was compliant and relatively quiet—someone Miss Elyse didn't have to worry about, which was a good thing, because Eugene Griese (his real name, pronounced “grease”) was in my class and he was enough trouble for everyone.

I look back on it as a funny, sad story of trying to get my teacher to see me as someone other than a good girl who neither exceeded nor failed to meet expectations. I was just there, in the classroom, acting in accordance with wishes, demands, requirements, or conditions. Most days being good was good enough, and I felt not a flicker of intellectual interest or urgency, but also no inclination to quit working diligently. My favorite class was social studies because I love maps, but I must not have shown any particular strength; no one ever acknowledged it if I had.

So much has changed in today's classrooms, hasn't it? We go out of our way to describe students' strengths so they can build on them; we talk to them about their learning lives

Small Distinctions, Big Difference

Engage: to occupy a person's intentions or efforts—*syn.* absorb, engross, interest, involve

Motivate: to incite or impel—*syn.* provoke, cause, propel

Participate: to take or have a part, to share, as with others, partake—*syn.* share

Comply: to act in accordance with wishes, demands, requirements, or conditions—*syn.* acquiesce, conform, obey

Pause and ponder . . .

Think about four students you've known who personify, more or less, each of the definitions above. Jot some notes that describe each student.

What patterns do you notice when you compare the four profiles?

and encourage them to pursue questions of passionate interest. We give them choice in the books they read and the topics about which they write. But think for a moment about the compliant kid in your classroom this year, the one who might just go rogue some spring afternoon and pretend to chew gum! Aren't we perhaps a little too glad to have those children in our rooms, the ones who just do the work and require less frequent attention? Isn't it nice to be able to put a child who struggles with impulse control in a group with the compliant ones? Isn't it great to be able to rely on them to be task driven when there are visitors in the classroom? They don't seem to *need* to be motivated, these compliant ones. They don't worry us too much; they aren't really a blip on our radar screens.

What are the compliant kids missing in terms of learning? They may be remembering a great deal of what they've been taught; they're probably working hard for grades. They may see good grades as evidence of learning and doing the "right" thing in school, but there are some rather sinister long-term implications for the compliant kids. For example, I didn't think I had any intellectual strength until college when a creative writing professor remarked positively on one of my submissions. Many teachers tell me they had the same kind of K–12 experience. Some say they *never* saw themselves as the kind of person who would live an intellectual life. We were the compliant ones. We looked like we were learning. We did our work and behaved. And we are in every classroom today, maybe even chewing imaginary gum.

PARTICIPATION

During a recent walkabout with a principal, I ducked into a fourth-grade class in which the children were caught up in small-group projects, designing posters to "advertise" their state to possible tourists. They had been asked to gather information on such scintillating facts as the state motto (in Latin), the state fish, and the state bird and to incorporate those tidbits into the posters. I know I always choose my summer vacation spot based on a state's Latin motto! (I must get control over this sarcasm.) Yet they were all hunched over large posters, contributing bits of writing and decorating the borders with intricate patterns. At first glance, this is exactly what we hope to see in a classroom—kids working together on a common goal, everyone doing their part, their talk a quiet hum in the background. We have to "cover" our state for the social studies curriculum; surely this is a much better way than wading through some ancient textbook!

Upon closer observation, however, some interesting patterns began to emerge. I noticed that everyone in each group had been assigned a portion of the project and the

children themselves had done the assigning! One child quickly handed out jobs as soon as they gathered on the floor to work. “Okay, Gina, you do the state facts. Arturo, you write the ‘advertising copy’ [designed to entice visitors to the state]. Charisse, you should be the artist [charged with making the posters look interesting], and I’ll do the oral presentation for the other members of the class [who were preparing the same presentations].” Here were groups that appeared to be collaborating, but what we were seeing was a more sophisticated form of the parallel play we often observe in toddlers. Everyone was busy. Everyone was participating. Everyone was doing an assigned job. There was peace throughout the land as the visitors peered over their shoulders and the principal smiled broadly.

Let’s also think about participation of another kind—one you’ve seen a million times. Some educators refer to this process as IRE which stands for Initiate, Respond, Evaluate. The teacher asks a question, and the students raise their hands or write an answer on a whiteboard or smartboard that immediately tallies the number of correct answers. The teacher then evaluates their responses in some way. IRE is wholly ineffective if we value and seek to encourage collaboration and engagement. It has been widely discredited (Lefstein and Snell 2015) but is still a very common practice.

Here’s a quick example:

T: Who can tell me when the United States was involved in the Civil War?

S: Like, when our parents were little?

T: No. (*Laughs a little.*) It was way before that! Anyone else?

S: I think it was when Martin Luther King was alive.

T: No, I think you have the Civil War confused with the civil rights movement. Anyone else?

S (*the reliable one*): 1861–1865?

T: Yes! Very good!

In some classrooms, participation is even tallied and graded—you get extra credit for answering more questions or entering a “conversation” the most frequently.

But wait! Participation can’t be a negative, can it? The outcomes of participation are always positive, right? Participation is defined as “to take or have a part, to share, to partake.” The definition itself includes a series of fairly limp verbs—“to take a part, to partake” and sadly, that’s exactly what we observed when students were making their Illinois state posters—everyone taking on a solitary part just to get the job done.

It seems a great distance from participation to true collaboration. Are we making those differences clear to children, or are we hoping that someone can say “1861–1865”? Are we modeling how true collaborators generate questions, wrestle with ideas seeking to influence and to be influenced by others’ perspectives, disagreeing sometimes, generating new ideas, failing frequently, and revising, revising, revising? When they’re working together so beautifully, it seems folly to interfere. Maybe children aren’t “developmentally ready” to collaborate? Hmm, have you ever seen a bunch of kindergartners gather around a building project? Perhaps the problem is that we expect only superficial participation and are glad when we get it!

MOTIVATION

Let’s look again at that definition of *motivate*—“to incite or impel,” with synonyms such as *provoke*, *cause*, or *propel*. In each case, it seems that the *impetus for motivation comes from outside the learner*. I’ve argued in this chapter that rewards and other forms of extrinsic motivation are fraught with problems if our goal is to enhance children’s learning. I’ve worried on paper that if children are dependent on someone to “motivate” them, they will almost certainly experience many extended periods in their lives with little motivation. But what about intrinsic motivation? Let’s pause to consider what we mean by internal, or intrinsic, motivation.

Moving beyond the dictionary definition, most psychologists describe intrinsic motivation as an internal drive to act based on finding the action satisfying or fulfilling. I am intrinsically motivated, for example, when I get a glass of water to quench my thirst. I’m not given an award for it, I just feel better. Or I continue to shop at a particular store—a fun shoe store, for example—because I like the products. The shoes are a form of reward, but no one is praising or giving me a token to buy those shoes—as a matter of fact, I’m out a good deal of money!

Intrinsic motivation may also describe, for example, a child’s desire to play soccer year after year. He or she finds it fun, challenging, and rewarding. There are likely friends and beloved coaches who inspire the young athletes to continue to play. Or consider a child who may want to read a series of books by an author. The child has discovered (often through a recommendation from a peer or an adult) that she is comfortable with the author’s writing style and finds the books intriguing enough to continue through the series. No one is rewarding her extrinsically; she is intrinsically motivated to read all of them. Internal motivation seems to be results-oriented or related to people pleasing—I may be driven to read every book by a particular author because my beloved

teacher turned me on to the author. Internal motivation often entails input from someone who inspires or encourages the learner. But, will that beloved teacher always be there to incite or impel?

Intrinsic motivation describes a very wide range of actions and impulses, from the most mundane to the more complex challenges. But where does intrinsic motivation come from? Who *initiates* the activity that becomes motivating, and in the end, who *owns* it? Is a second grader or, for that matter, a tenth grader capable of lighting the fire of internal motivation on their own? I will argue throughout this book that the second grader and the tenth grader *are* capable of intrinsic motivation, particularly if they are surrounded by other learners (children and adults) who inspire them to continue. But intrinsic motivation is often dependent on the presence or influence of another learner, an athlete or artist, a community servant or relief worker, who, explicitly or not, gives us a reason to dig in.

I take nothing away from intrinsic motivation—it is *essential* for in-depth learning and it is very important for all of us to discover *who and what* inspires and drives us to act and to understand how to recapture that drive when we feel it waning. Through interviews with children and teachers, I've learned that intrinsic motivation often, but not always, leads to engagement. It's engagement, though, that may be the gold standard for learning.

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is more difficult to describe than motivation and will be the focus of the rest of this book. To begin, think about a time when you were immersed in an activity, lost in the experience of thought, and so overwhelmed or awestruck that you found yourself overcome with emotion, or were surprised when you were persuaded to rethink something and discovered a deep well of understanding. I believe it is critically important to revisit our own engaged experiences in order to enter into meaningful discussion with children about theirs.

In conversations with colleagues, friends, and family, I don't go a week without someone telling me about how deeply moved they were by a book or learning experience. We may say that a book we recently finished "was one of my top ten books of all time; I'm going to reread it immediately!" Or maybe we dropped everything for hours and just wandered through a museum, or climbed a challenging mountain trail to find a pristine lake near the summit. We are engaged.

We describe periods of engagement as occasions when time stands still and every pressing issue recedes into the background while we listen to music, write in a journal, listen to the sounds of nature, or study a topic of passionate interest. Perhaps we remember times when we were totally caught up in a discussion about politics or contemporary social issues, when others' opinions and knowledge impacted our thinking in a permanent way. Or our sense of outrage toward social injustices peaks, and we begin to act on behalf of others. We are engaged.

It seems to me that our universal goal is to teach so that students remember and can reapply their knowledge in new contexts. Engagement leads *to more memorable learning and the propensity to reuse information*. It is key to children believing that they can live intellectual lives, something I have cared deeply and written about for many years (Keene 2008). Worth repeating: We remember and reapply more effectively when we are engaged. And if students are more likely to learn effectively when engaged, we need to discuss how we can help them find those sweet spots.

For clarity, let's contrast internal motivation and engagement. To return to the earlier example, if a child is internally motivated to read the next book in a popular series, she is responding initially to someone who recommended the series, but perhaps she has found that she likes the characters or is driven to find out what happens next in each plot. She reads with eager anticipation, straining to find out what happens and eager to move on to the next title in the series. She is motivated, not by extrinsic reward, but intrinsically, to read on. Obviously, we are thrilled when a child is motivated in this way, but is she engaged?

As she turns the pages, she may or may not experience the intoxicating surprise of ideas that are new to her, ideas that challenge her knowledge of the world and her beliefs, ideas about which she feels she *must* learn more. She may or may not have a strong emotional reaction to the characters or the plot; she may be reading primarily to follow an interesting story line and to "find out what happens" but not necessarily because she's "moved" by the book—she may not experience intense joy or sorrow. As she chews through books in the series, she may well chat with friends who are reading or have read the books, but those conversations may focus on how cool the books are, or on preventing another child from blurting out what happens in the end—spoiler alert! The conversations about the book may or may not involve discussion about the internal life revealed in the characters; there may or may not be debate in which children disagree and try to persuade each other to consider their point of view. And our internally motivated child

may or may not experience moments of near transcendence, moments of beauty as her eyes move over the words, moments when goosebumps cover her skin and she just has to reread that one passage. The latter experiences characterize engagement.

Key Differences Between Internal Motivation and Engagement

Often, those writing about engagement describe the feelings and sensations associated with engagement as happening *while* the learner is immersed in the cognitive or behavioral activity. Internal motivation may *lead* us to take some action; for many, engagement refers to what we experience *during* the activity. That may be true, however business consultant Jeffrey Tobin (2016) describes the distinction between intrinsic motivation and engagement this way: “Motivation: What’s in it for me? Engagement: What’s in it for us?” I found both simple distinctions very provocative and helpful.

Consider your priorities related to student work. We (rightfully) rejoice when students find an author they love, undertake research to explore a question of interest, or write a compelling opinion piece. We often work diligently just to get students to that point, and well we should—intrinsic motivation is critically important to all of us! In the spirit of deepening students’ understanding and the urge to learn, however, I suggest engagement is by far the more powerful and lasting driver. Intrinsic motivation can be a path to or may coexist with engagement. I won’t go so far as to say that intrinsic motivation *must* come before engagement—we may not need motivation to be engaged—but if we bifurcate the two ideas as Tobin does, engagement takes on important additional dimensions that go beyond any kind of motivation. Engagement, like intrinsic motivation, is internally driven, but our experience of engagement goes beyond motivation. The engaged learner isn’t only interested in herself; she ponders how a topic or issue impacts others, and she considers how her thinking, emotions, beliefs, and/or actions might affect those around her. An engaged learner has a strong sense of *purpose*. There is something to be learned that reaches far beyond the words on the page or the immediate experience.


Here’s another way to look at the contrast between intrinsic motivation and engagement. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that engagement refers to a state of being, a sensation that he calls *flow*; it’s a feeling that is all too rare in children’s learning lives

and, I believe, need not be. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow in this way: “There’s this focus that, once it becomes intense, leads to a sense of ecstasy, a sense of clarity: you know exactly what you want to do from one moment to the other; you get immediate feedback. You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger. And once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake” (249). You feel part of something larger—that’s the distinction between internal motivation and engagement. Right there.

I want to be clear—no one can (or would want to) spend all their time deeply engaged as described above or as I will define it. There is a need for compliance, participation (particularly when it has more to do with collaboration), and internal motivation. We need children to comply with our admonitions to look both ways before they cross the street and to refrain from striking another child when they become angry. We want children to be helpful participants in a classroom community, and internal motivation is often the launching pad for engagement.

Most teachers agree, however, that we want the proportion of children’s time to tilt toward intrinsic motivation and engagement. I’m going to argue that we need to increase the amount of time kids spend deeply engaged because it proves intoxicating and has a real impact on whether children retain and reapply what they’ve learned (Marinak and Gambrell 2016). To do that, we have to know what it feels, sounds, smells, and looks like when we are engaged and when a child is engaged.

In the coming chapters, I will propose ways for us to consider these important distinctions and to facilitate your students’ growth toward true engagement. I will support the idea that engagement is not just “caught”; it can be taught! If we take the long view—what we want children to be able to think, feel, believe, and act upon, not in just twenty days or weeks, but in twenty years, and not only for themselves, but on behalf of others—it will become clear that engagement is one of the most crucial learning tools we can help children develop. More important, however, engagement is a significant part of what makes us feel truly alive.



In the meantime, consider these questions and go online to explore them with colleagues who are also reading this book! What did you come to believe about compliance, participation, motivation, and engagement when you were a student?