Making Engagement Central

If students become engaged in the right "stuff," they are likely to learn what we want them to learn.

In *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse* (Schlechty, 2000), I distinguish among five types of responses students might make to any school task (see Figure 1.1):

- *Authentic engagement.* The task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake is associated with a result or outcome that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student—for example, reading a book on a topic of personal interest to the student or to get access to information that the student needs to solve a problem of real interest to him or her.

- *Ritual engagement.* The immediate end of the assigned work has little or no inherent meaning or direct value to the student, but the student associates it with extrinsic outcomes and results that are of value—for example, reading a book in order to pass a test or to earn grades needed to be accepted at college.[1]

- *Passive compliance.* The student is willing to expend whatever effort is needed to avoid negative consequences, although he or she sees little meaning in the tasks assigned or the consequences of doing those tasks.

- *Retreatism.* The student is disengaged from the tasks, expends no energy in attempting to comply with the demands of the tasks, but does not act in ways that disrupt others and does not try to substitute other activities for the assigned task.

- *Rebellion.* The student summarily refuses to do the task assigned, acts in ways that disrupt others, or attempts to substitute tasks and activities to which he or
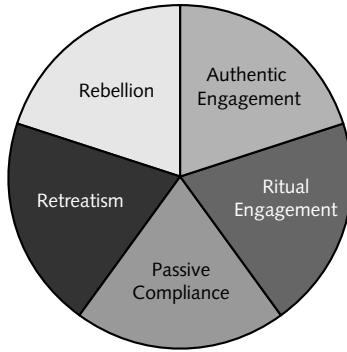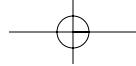
Figure 1.1.
Student Responses To Schoolwork.

she is committed in lieu of those assigned or supported by the school and by the teacher.

Given this typology, it becomes possible to characterize classrooms in terms of the patterns of engagement that are observed. These characterizations are based on the following assumptions:

• Any given student will be engaged in different ways in different tasks, and sometimes this engagement will differ with regard to the same task. For example, a student who normally finds a task authentically engaging may resort to retreatism on a given day or at a given moment simply because he or she is tired or distracted by other concerns. Sometimes the same student may be passively compliant, and at other times the only thing that is compelling about the task is what its accomplishment makes possible in another arena (perhaps eligibility to play football). The issue is not the presence or absence of these different forms of engagement but the pattern these forms create over time.

Any given student will be engaged in different ways
in different tasks—at times, even with regard to the
same task.
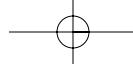
How Students Respond to School Tasks

- *Authentic engagement.* The task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake is associated with a result or outcome that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student—for example, reading a book on a topic of personal interest to the student or to get access to information that the student needs to solve a problem of real interest to him or her.

- *Ritual engagement.* The immediate end of the assigned work has little or no inherent meaning or direct value to the student, but the student associates it with extrinsic outcomes and results that are of value—for example, reading a book in order to pass a test or to earn grades needed to be accepted at college.

- *Passive compliance.* The student is willing to expend whatever effort is needed to avoid negative consequences, although he or she sees little meaning in the tasks assigned or the consequences of doing those tasks.

- *Retreatism.* The student is disengaged from the tasks, expends no energy in attempting to comply with the demands of the tasks, but does not act in ways that disrupt others and does not try to substitute other activities for the assigned task.

- *Rebellion.* The student summarily refuses to do the task assigned, acts in ways that disrupt others, or attempts to substitute tasks and activities to which he or she is committed in lieu of those assigned or supported by the school and by the teacher.

- Retreatism, passive compliance, and ritual engagement are not in themselves indicators of pathology in the classroom. Furthermore, a student who is ritually engaged or passively compliant or in a retreatist mode is not necessarily "misbehaving." In fact, it is not at all clear that anyone could tolerate—emotionally and physically—being engaged authentically all the time. Retreatism may be a resting point for a student who has otherwise been authentically engaged throughout the activity.
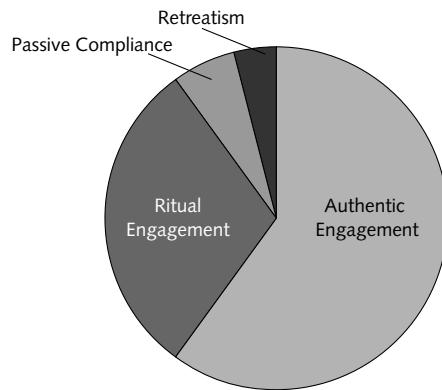
Figure 1.2.
Student Responses in the Highly Engaged Classroom.

• As schools are now organized, student success, especially success in doing well in an environment that places emphasis on high test scores, does not require authentic engagement.[2] In fact, many of the strategies that are being advanced to improve test scores are nothing more or less than efforts to increase passive compliance and ritual engagement and decrease retreatism and rebellion.[3]

• Each of the types of engagement represents a different type or category of response rather than a different point on a continuum. A student who is ritually engaged is engaged in a different way than is a student who is authentically engaged. Those who are ritually engaged are not necessarily less engaged than are those who are authentically engaged; they are engaged for a different reason or set of reasons. Similarly, passive compliance is a distinct type of engagement. Unlike either authentic engagement or ritual engagement, however, passive compliance is likely to be motivated more by avoidance of punishment or unpleasant consequences than by any type of positive goal or outcome.

• It is assumed that different types of engagement produce different types of commitment and, therefore, different types of effort and learning results. Here it is important to note that I proceed from the hunch—and at this point it is nothing more than a hunch—that students who are ritually engaged do learn what they need to learn to do well on tests and satisfy the demands of adult authority, although they probably retain less of what they have "learned" than would be the case if they were authentically engaged. Indeed, students who are
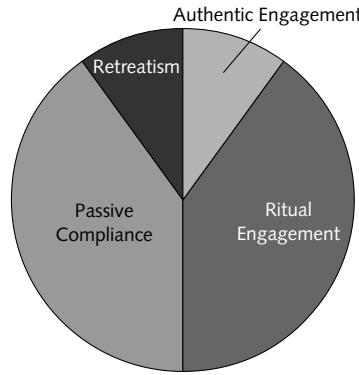
Figure 1.3.
Student Responses in the Well-Managed Classroom.

ritually engaged are likely to be so concerned with what is going to be on the test that they will be reluctant to undertake any task that does not have some clear payoff in terms of extrinsic values associated with such performance measures.[4]

THE HIGHLY ENGAGED CLASSROOM

In the highly engaged classroom, most students are authentically engaged most of the time (see Figure 1.2). There are also, however, considerable ritual engagement, some passive compliance, and maybe even a limited amount of retreatism. Rebellion may also occur in the highly engaged classroom, but it will be idiosyncratic and will not be sustained long enough to be patterned. In summary, most students in the highly engaged classroom are authentically engaged most of the time, and all students are authentically engaged some of the time. It is also a classroom that has little or no rebellion, limited retreatism, and limited passive compliance.

THE WELL-MANAGED CLASSROOM

The well-managed classroom has considerably less authentic engagement than does the highly engaged classroom (see Figure 1.3). It also has considerably more passive compliance and retreatism. Ritual engagement, as opposed to authentic
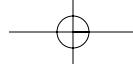
engagement, is the dominant mode of response in the well-managed classroom. As in the highly engaged classroom, there is little or no rebellion.

Because such a classroom is orderly and most students seem to do the work assigned—some with a degree of enthusiasm—it is easy for the teacher and the outside observer to confuse the well-managed classroom with the highly engaged classroom. The well-managed classroom appears well managed not because students are authentically engaged but because they are willing to be compliant. As long as the teacher and the principal fail to ask the right questions of students, the absence of authentic engagement will probably go unnoticed, though the effects on learning may be quite real. (See, for example, Pope, 2001.)

THE PATHOLOGICAL CLASSROOM

The pathological classroom looks very much like the well-managed classroom except for the presence of patterned rebellion (see Figure 1.4). The rebellion is not limited to isolated cases. Many students actively reject the task assigned or substitute other activity to replace what has been officially assigned or expected. (Cheating is a form of rebellion too.)

Furthermore, it seems likely that in the effort to reduce rebellion, teachers in the pathological classroom often settle for retreatism or passive compliance and "work on the students" to gain such a response. Indeed, although I have no empirical evidence on which to base my hunch, I would bet that teachers in pathological classrooms tend to lower performance expectations to the point that passive compliance gets higher rewards (better grades) than would be produced in a highly engaged classroom. This could be one source of the grade inflation that is of such concern to some critics of public schools.

Nevertheless, there is likely to be some degree of authentic engagement even in the pathological classroom. For example, the subject being taught may be of such interest to a particular student that he or she finds meaning in the tasks even when the tasks are poorly designed.

There is likely to be considerable ritual engagement as well; some students need the grade to get into college, or they so fear displeasing their parents that they do whatever they need to do to get the teacher's approval. The incidence of passive compliance will also be high, as will be the incidence of retreatism. Indeed, it is the increase in retreatism and the presence of patterns of rebellion that distinguish the pathological classroom from the well-managed classroom.

Authentic Engagement

Rebellion

Ritual
Engagement

Retreatism

Passive
Compliance
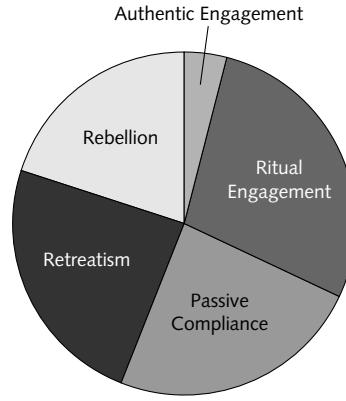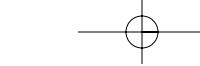
**Figure 1.4.
Student Responses in the Pathological Classroom.**

Classrooms and Engagement

Highly Engaged Classroom
A classroom in which most students are authentically engaged most of the
time, all students are authentically engaged most of the time, and all students
are authentically engaged some of the time. It is also a classroom that has lit-
tle or no rebellion, limited retreatism, and limited passive compliance.

The Well-Managed Classroom
The well-managed classroom appears well managed, not because students are
authentically engaged but because they are willing to be compliant. As long
as the teacher and the principal fail to ask the right questions of the students,
the absence of authentic engagement will likely not be noticed.

The Pathological Classroom
The pathological classroom looks very much like the well-managed classroom
except for the presence of patterned rebellion. In the pathological classroom,
many students actively reject the task assigned or the substitution of other ac-
tivity to replace what has been officially assigned or expected (or both).
(Cheating is a form of rebellion.)
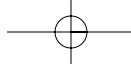
DEVELOPING AN ENGAGEMENT PROFILE

One of the first steps in moving toward continuously improving the quality of the work provided to students is to center attention on the patterns of engagement in a classroom or set of classrooms.[5] An individual teacher operating alone can do much to understand better what is going on in his or her classroom. For example, using the rubrics provided later in this chapter as a guide, teachers can develop a profile of their own classroom, whether or not the principal or the colleagues join them. I have found, however, that leadership by a principal and support from colleagues increase the likelihood that teachers will stick with the process long enough to make it a routine part of their school lives.

*Teachers can develop a profile of their own classroom
to understand better what is going on.*

There are a variety of ways to generate the energy needed to sustain a group effort. One that I have observed to work well includes beginning with an "all-hands" workshop where the faculty is made aware of the basic ideas underlying the WOW model.[6] Following the initial workshop, principals are encouraged to work with volunteer teachers to develop an engagement profile for the school.

At the same time, volunteer teachers are encouraged to develop profiles of their own classroom along the lines suggested by Figures 1.1 through 1.4. By making comparisons between two points in time (say, week 1 compared to week 2), teachers are able to see, in graphic terms, how patterns of engagement in their classroom vary from day to day and task to task. As teachers begin to see such variance, they begin to ask why this is so. Most teachers already understand, intuitively at least, that the nature of the work they assign to students has a considerable bearing on this matter. Initially, however, some teachers may seek explanations in such factors as the time of day, the day of the week, and maybe even the sign of the moon. Eventually, most teachers come to embrace the notion that the tasks that they assign to students are one of the few variables under their control that directly affect student engagement. It is at this point that the WOW framework begins to make real sense to teachers. When they come to believe that they can make a direct and im-

mediate difference in something they care about (and they do care about student engagement), they have a reason to work on the work.
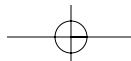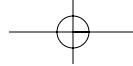
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*Patterns of engagement vary
from day to day and task to task.*

A BEGINNING POINT FOR MEASUREMENT

Efforts to measure student engagement are just beginning.[7] The Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR), a nonprofit corporation I founded in 1988, has recently engaged in a partnership arrangement with software development firm Tetra-Data that is intended to create ways of collecting and managing data relevant to engagement that will be unobtrusive, require little additional teacher effort, and be easy to manage and analyze. However, no standard measures exist now. Therefore, principals and teachers, while taking advantage of what is provided here, need to be prepared to create their own measures. The following observations are important as foreground to this creative effort:

• Each of the five types of engagement should be treated as a discreet category rather than a point on a continuum. For example, it should not be assumed that the student who is authentically engaged in the task assigned is more engaged than the student who is ritually engaged. The authentically engaged student is simply engaged in a different way. Similarly, the passively compliant student is not less engaged than the ritually engaged, even though passive compliance is likely to produce less effort than is either ritual engagement or authentic engagement.[8]

• Retreatism is really a form of disengagement, which is categorically different from engagement.

• Rebellion is—or may be—a form of engagement, but the focus of the engagement may be at odds with that which is needed if the student is to learn what it is intended he or she learn. The student who cheats on a test, for example, may be authentically engaged in doing what is needed to get a good grade but rejects completely the requirements of the tasks he or she needs to complete to accomplish this end by legitimate means.
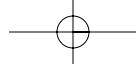
RUBRICS

Rubrics are often useful in developing ways of measuring social phenomena. The five rubrics that follow can serve as frameworks for teachers and principals who are working toward developing ways of assessing student engagement:

- *Authentic engagement.* Authentically engaged students see meaning in what they are doing, and that meaning is connected to ends or results that truly matter to the students. Indeed, these authentically engaged students may be willing to do some boring and otherwise meaningless tasks, precisely because they see the linkage between what is being done and some task-related end of significant consequence to them. For example, students who want to become musicians regularly practice scales (not a particularly exciting task) because they see such practice as a means of achieving the end they have in view.

Authentically engaged students see meaning in what they are doing.

The critical point is that when students are authentically engaged, the distinction between ends and means becomes blurred. What in another context they would consider trivial and meaningless becomes loaded with meaning and significance to those who are authentically engaged. Thus, the student who diligently proofreads his or her paper to ensure that the grammar and punctuation are correct because he or she takes pride in being a good writer is engaged in a different way from the student who does such checking only "when it counts for a grade."

- *Ritual engagement.* This form of engagement is typified by the separation of means from ends. Students do the work and carry out the tasks, sometimes with diligence and persistence, but they do so for reasons that are disassociated from the task itself. The end toward which the task is directed (such as the production of a good work product) is unimportant to the student. What is important is the impact the successful completion of the task will have on other areas of school life or on the student's personal life. Thus a student who is bent on being admitted to a highly selective college is more likely to be concerned with the
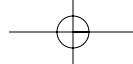
grade she or he receives in the course than with whatever learning must be done to attain that grade. "Tell me what to do and I will do it, no matter how meaningless it is to me," characterizes a ritual response.

• *Passive compliance.* As the word *compliance* indicates, passive compliance suggests acceptance and resignation more than enthusiasm and commitment. When students respond in a passive compliant mode, they are seeking minimums. What does it take to get by here? is a more likely question than is, What do I need to do to excel? Minimums and accommodations are more important than accomplishment and attainment.

  Passive compliance suggests that students are engaged but, like ritual engagement, the ends and the means are separated. Furthermore, passive compliance suggests that students find little of value associated with the task either directly or indirectly. Passive compliance is more likely motivated by a student's desire to avoid unpleasant consequences than by the pursuit of some positive value or goal.

• *Retreatism.* Retreatism carries with it the suggestion of disengagement. The task or assignment has no attraction to the student, and the student is not compelled by other considerations, such as the need for a passing grade, athletic eligibility, or peer approval, to do anything active to support the task. Retreatism suggests a type of withdrawing of support for the activity that is taking place or is expected to take place. However, students who are adapting to a task by retreating from its demands do not substitute their own agenda into the situation. They simply withdraw—mentally and sometimes physically—from what is going on in the immediate environment.

• *Rebellion.* Students responding by rebelling overtly reject the task, refuse to comply, and often lack willingness to be passive about the failure to comply. Indeed, rebellion can involve seeking to get a desired end by substituting new, and disapproved, means, such as cheating, negotiating standards, or bringing parental pressure to bear.

OBTAINING RELEVANT DATA

The way to go about getting relevant data depends on the context. Assessing engagement in a primary school requires different strategies than will be needed in a high school. If the level of trust among faculty is high, one set of strategies may
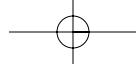
work, but if trust is low, other strategies will need to be developed. In general, however, in the early stages, it is probably wise to avoid focusing on individual classrooms unless the teachers volunteer to submit their classrooms to such public scrutiny. Lacking a significant number of volunteers, it seems better to focus attention on the school in general.

One way of doing this is for the principal to administer to all students a questionnaire like the one presented in Exhibit 1.1. Using the data from this questionnaire—or some variation thereof—it is possible to construct a pie chart showing the pattern for the week. This exercise could be repeated for several weeks to see if

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Exhibit 1.1.
Student Questionnaire on Classroom Engagement.

Looking back over the past week, which of the following statements most closely reflects the way you have approached your classes and the work your teachers have assigned? (Circle the statement that most closely reflects your view.)

• I really have been engaged in the work and in my classes, and I generally do what I am asked to do because I see the relevance of what I am being asked to do to things that I care about. [authentic engagement]

• I always pay attention in class and do the work I am assigned because I want to get good grades, but I really don't see much merit in what I am asked to do and would not do it if I did not feel I had to. [ritual engagement]

• I do what I need to do to get by, but I really don't put out any more effort than I feel I have to if I am to stay out of trouble. [passive compliance]

• I am bored, and I have done very little work for my classes, but I have not caused any trouble for my teachers. [retreatism]

• I have been in some trouble because I have not done what the teacher wants me to do, but that is just the way it goes. I don't plan to change what I am doing. [rebellion]
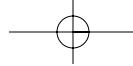
there is any variation. Making such data public in the teachers' lounge will un-doubtedly do much to focus attention on issues related to engagement. (It is important that no effort should be made to identify individual teachers or isolate individual classrooms. In the early stages, teachers need the protection of anonymity.)

Another strategy is to create an interview protocol that teachers or the principal might use that calls on students to express their feelings about their responses to their classes in general or to the class of a particular teacher. The results of these interviews might then be reviewed by a teacher or group of teachers and categorized into one of the five categories of engagement listed above. (Here, the rubrics provided should be instructive.) This process has the advantage of encouraging teachers to reflect on the meaning of each category but the disadvantage of making responses public, which can be threatening to both the students and the teachers involved.

Experience indicates that as principals work with teachers on these issues, the threat value of interviews decreases, especially as teachers begin to see how such data can be of use to them in determining the effects and effectiveness of what they are doing on a daily basis. The principal should not, however, force anyone to participate in this process. Rather, he or she should seek out those "trailblazers and pioneers" (see Schlechty, 1997) on the faculty who might find such an adventure exciting as well as productive. Teachers who want to initiate such an activity should solicit the support and involvement of the principal, even as they are testing out some of these ideas on their own.

A CAUTION

The idea of the teacher as performer, rather than the teacher as leader and inventor, creates conditions that sometimes have unfortunate consequences; for example, when teachers view themselves and their own performance as the central concern, they sometimes see the lack of authentic engagement in their classrooms as a reflection on themselves and their personality. They also see the quest for evidence regarding such matters as a prelude to one more effort to "work on the teacher."

What the committed principal and trailblazer teachers must communicate to those who are reluctant to participate is that trying to work on a teacher to make him or her more engaging has proved to be just about as productive of improved student performance as has the effort to work on the students. It is time to quit this futile effort and work on something that really matters: the quality of the work
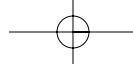
provided to students. If teachers can control the quality of the work they assign students, there is some prospect of increasing student engagement. If students become engaged in the right "stuff," they are likely to learn what we want them to learn. When students learn what it is intended that they learn, we will have schools that have done what they are supposed to do.

Notes

1. The idea or ritual engagement, as well as the ideas of retreatism and rebellion, were suggested to me by Robert K. Merton's book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968).

2. This does not mean I advocate abandoning authentic engagement as a goal. Rather, I make this observation to point out that teachers can experience the illusion of success by having a well-managed classroom where ritual engagement and passive compliance are the norm and never really create an environment where authentic engagement is the norm. That is why I insist on distinguishing between the well-managed classroom and the highly engaged classroom.

3. Alfie Kohn has made this point repeatedly (see, for example, Kohn, 2001), as have others.

4. Some empirical research supports this view. See, for example, Kohn's discussion (2001) of the relationship between superficial coverage and test scores. See also "*Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (Pope, 2001) and *Another Planet: A Year in the Life of a Suburban High School* (Burkett, 2001). The authors of these books make a powerful case that much that passes for academic excellence in even the best of schools is little more than ritual engagement or passive compliance. Cheating, which is a form of rebellion, also appears to be more common that one might want to believe.

5. Outside observers, as well as some teachers, sometimes confuse activity with engagement. Activity of the hands-on variety can be an effective means of increasing engagement, but some types of hands-on activity are mindless and without meaning or significance. Engagement has to do with the extent to which an activity has meaning and significance to the student rather than the amount of physical effort expended. It is therefore important to focus attention on the meaning the work has for students rather than the amount of "activity" involved.

6. The Center for Leadership in School Reform has developed a two-day
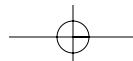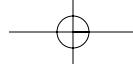
workshop intended to develop the needed level of awareness among school faculties. I strongly urge interested principals to contract for this service. Absent that, I would encourage principals to obtain the training materials from CLSR and participate in a CLSR principal training program intended to develop the skills needed to conduct such a workshop on site.

7. A wide body of research deals with time on task. Readers should not assume that the measurement problems associated with assessing patterns of engagement can be solved in the same way as those who have tried to measure time on task. *Time on task* and *engagement* are not synonyms. Observational studies may help assess engagement, but any reasonable assessment of patterns of engagement will involve some sort of direct and focused responses from individual students; thus interviews and questionnaires will probably be required as well as observation.

8. The idea that different types of engagement produce different levels of effort, combined with the idea that effort and learning are associated, suggests some intriguing research possibilities.