CHAPTER 6:

Supporting student engagement

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When schools, teachers and families take suitable steps to help ease the transition, the move to secondary school in itself need not be a major issue for the majority of students.

We found that most students understood the reason for and value of school. Most expressed a preference for going to school rather than staying at home. And many found a lot to enjoy at school — before and after the transition — both socially and in their learning in class and for the range of other opportunities afforded them through school.

> *Many found a lot to enjoy at school. But a drop over time in the extent to which students engaged in their learning suggests that many do not get the best out of their time at school.*

Despite these positive findings, another key finding to emerge from our transition study was that of a steady decline (from Year 8 to Year 10) in positive attitudes to subjects[28] and a simultaneous drop in the extent to which students overall engaged in their learning, suggesting that many do not always get the best out of their learning time at school. While some degree of disengagement may be inevitable at times for almost everybody, there were indications that the extent to which this occurred for some students at least was too great.

Student interview data also showed that towards the end of Year 9, the students were generally much less likely than they had been in Year 8 to record that they did interesting or fun activities in class, or that they tried new or different things. And there was an overall increase in the proportion of students who indicated that they had to 'learn about too many boring things'.

Other studies, both national and international, reveal similar trends of a decline in middle years (Years 7 to 10) students' attitudes towards particular subjects. Information collected from the *National Education Monitoring Project* (NEMP)[29], for example, illustrates how students' enjoyment of reading in their own time decreases as they progress through the school system.

And the longitudinal *Competent Children, Competent Learners*[30] study shows a drop in students' attitudes towards reading and writing between primary and secondary school. A recent phase of this study — *Competent Learners @ 16* — also indicates that students who become disengaged from school tend to do so before the

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[28] As measured by the attitude scale in asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning), which participating students completed on four occasions over the period of the study.

[29] For further information about NEMP go to: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/research/nemp.html

[30] The website address for this study is: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/homepages/competentchildren/index.html

age of 12 years, with their lack of engagement escalating in adolescence and secondary school.

The tendency for students to become more critical is undoubtedly part and parcel of growing up. However, an increasing ability to become more (constructively) critical is essentially a good thing, and it is important to carefully analyse student feedback to see where certain conditions for learning may need to be improved or changed in order for students to experience greater satisfaction and achieve better outcomes.

Findings from our transition study

- Student feedback revealed that keeping all students engaged in their learning at school can be problematic, and increasingly so over time.

- While students generally had fairly positive attitudes towards mathematics, reading and writing at the outset of the study their attitudes declined as they progressed through secondary school.

- Although a significant proportion of the low achieving students in mathematics nominated this subject as one they liked best in Year 8 the proportion of those mentioning mathematics as a best liked subject decreased in each of Years 9 and 10.

- Describing what it was like to teach or generally deal with individual students in the study, participating teachers used the descriptors 'difficult' and 'worrying' for between 10 and 13 percent of the students. They also considered that around one-fifth of students showed 'poor concentration when working'.

What Do We Mean by 'Engagement'?

The topic of engagement in learning is a complex one.

'Engagement' at school can mean many things, ranging from a student choosing to attend school rather than truant, to a situation where students remain on-task or 'engaged' throughout an activity or task because they find

> *'Engagement' at school can mean many things.*

it to be 'fun' (but where learning of key concepts from the task may or may not be realised). It can also refer to a learning situation involving deeper-level cognitive engagement, in which the students actively problem-solve, think more broadly than the immediate topic, and can make insightful links to other learning areas.

It is outside the scope of this report to delve into all the intricacies of student engagement[31]. This chapter therefore focuses on some of the most common reasons students give to explain why they are more or less likely to become engaged in a topic or activity. This is important, as effective levels of student engagement (interest, motivation, curiosity, etc) is an essential precursor to effective achievement.

Factors Affecting Student Engagement or Disengagement

There are a range of factors that can impact in various ways on how well students relate to and are engaged by what they are learning at school.

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[31] However, suggestions for further reading regarding student engagement are articles by Fredricks et al (2004), Yonezawa et al (2009), and Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) as listed in the References section of this report. Also, student engagement is a focus of current work being carried out by NZCER (The New Zealand Council for Educational Research), Wellington.

These factors — also summarised in Figure 3 — include:

- nature of relationship with a teacher;

- nature of the relationship with other students in a class;

- the perceived relevance of the learning material;

- levels of knowledge and skills that students bring into each learning situation (eg, whether they find the work too easy or too difficult);

- the intrinsic interest of the subject or activity to a particular student;

- the way in which the learning task is approached (eg, teacher-directed vs. student-directed learning);

- the extent to which there is variety in learning approaches (for example, active involvement in an activity, in addition to simply copying notes from a board or reading from a text book);

- the nature and extent of teacher feedback on a student's progress;

- the extent to which students are able to take responsibility for their own learning.

Some of these factors are now discussed in more detail.

Learning in a Variety of Interesting Ways

For learning to occur, students first need to become interested in the learning material or tasks. Students frequently talk about their desire for more opportunities to experience learning in a range of (innovative) ways, to spark and maintain their interest and bring what they are learning to life.

In accord with these student views, Aitken and Sinnema (2008) report that approaching subject material in a number of different ways is not only important for creating interest on the part of the students, but is also necessary for helping students retain what they learn. They further state that '… the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counter-productive'.

> *Approaching subject material in a number of different ways is necessary to help students retain what they learn.*

While it seemed that not all teachers were fulfilling students' hopes or expectations regarding opportunities to learn in interesting ways, teacher participants in the transition study in general understood this need, even though they felt it was not always straightforward to achieve. Aitken and Sinnema provide suggestions for how teachers might work towards this, which can be very briefly summarised[32] as:

'Meet diverse motivational needs.

Maximise student interest.

Use a variety of activities.'

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[32] The extract on pp.94-95 from Aitken and Sinnema's 2008 publication provides some details about how to achieve these goals.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: There is frequently too much writing and copying work to do at secondary school, and too many lessons generally that are not interesting or fun. Also, when our expectations or hopes about a subject, topic, or activity do not match reality — that is, when we think there will be interesting content and approaches to learning, and this does not happen — it is hard to stay motivated.

Comment:

Often, the writing and copying work was just considered 'boring' because it did not promote or allow a sense of involvement with what they were learning, but some students — especially boys — also found it physically difficult, making it a challenge to write everything down in time and not 'get left behind' in classes.
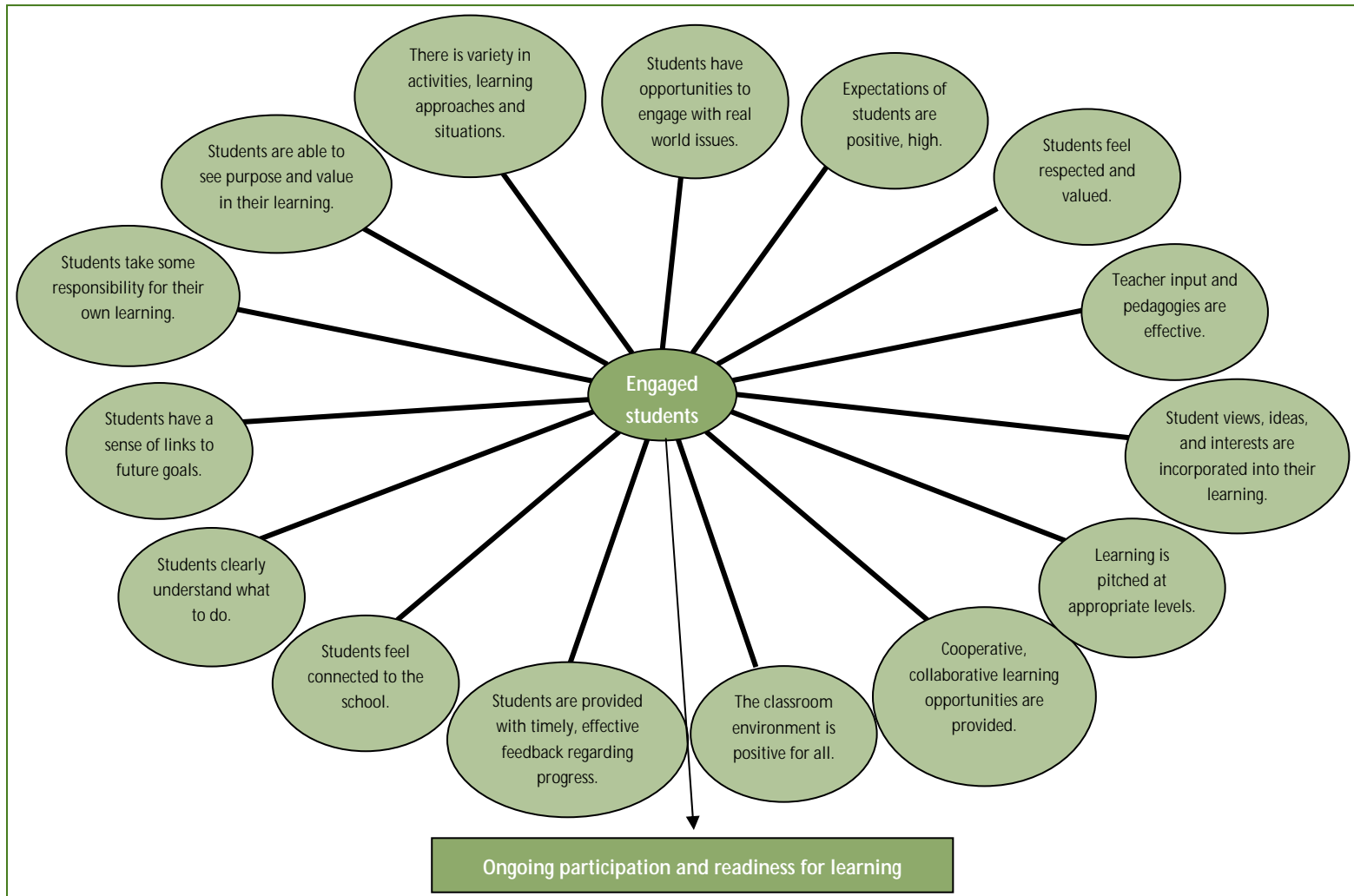
Student suggestions:

Ensure more variety in approaches to teaching and learning;

Incorporate 'fun' when learning, through increased use of humour in class, for example.

Students also liked it when teachers showed they were enthusiastic about the subject they were teaching as it helped them feel positively about what they were learning.

Figure 3: Factors in engaging students in their learning at school

There is variety in activities, learning approaches and situations.

Students have opportunities to engage with real world issues.

Expectations of students are positive, high.

Students feel respected and valued.

Students are able to see purpose and value in their learning.

Students take some responsibility for their own learning.

Teacher input and pedagogies are effective.

Students have a sense of links to future goals.

Engaged students

Student views, ideas, and interests are incorporated into their learning.

Students clearly understand what to do.

Learning is pitched at appropriate levels.

Students feel connected to the school.

Students are provided with timely, effective feedback regarding progress.

The classroom environment is positive for all.

Cooperative, collaborative learning opportunities are provided.

Ongoing participation and readiness for learning

The following is an extract from Graeme Aitken and Claire Sinnema's 2008 publication *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences/Tikanga ā Iwi* — Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES] (pp.179–182), produced for the Ministry of Education.

Why designing interesting experiences matter

"We had a sheet about it … it was just an activities sheet. Had a bit about it and some questions … I remember doing it but I don't remember a thing about it."

Aitken and Sinnema (2008) state: 'This comment from [a student some months after studying a unit of work], illustrates how students attach memories about what they learn to the way in which they learn it. [A focus on making learning experiences memorable and on how learning activities can stimulate motivation to learn is important.] It is through learning experiences (activities) that students encounter the knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and participatory opportunities that are important. But those activities first need to capture their interest. [Hansen (2002)[*] wrote]:

Engagement, involvement and engrossment, but not learning per se, [is] the immediate aim of teaching. If teachers cultivate and support conditions that engage students in an activity, whether it be interpreting a poem, conducting an experiment, or debating the cause of an historical event, learning will more likely be the outcome…[33]

[Csikszentmihalyi (1990)[**] put] the importance of this motivational orientation even more directly:

The chief impediments to learning are not cognitive. It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish to. If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate the students' enjoyment of learning, we could achieve much better results.

[Aitken and Sinnema explain that] learning activities can be designed to increase engagement and interest and, as a result, generate learning that is memorable. [They emphasise that designing effective learning activities means taking into account diverse motivations, selecting activities that are intrinsically interesting, and incorporating a variety of activity types.]

Diverse motivations

Learners are not all motivated in the same way: what interests one may not interest another. (And what teachers envisage as motivating may not prove motivating for students.) For this reason, it is important to understand and take account of different motivations for learning. … teachers need to find out what motivates *their* students. One approach is to list teaching methods/approaches (such as role playing, reading historical novels [eg, in the teaching of the social sciences], participating in small-group projects) and ask students to rank these in order of preference.

Another approach [is an instrument that] … enables students to record their subjective experience of tasks as they engage in them and keep a log of their experiences as they move from one activity to another. The instrument is based on general principles of motivation and comprises the following items:

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[33] But see authors' caution in the further extract from their report (given on p.105) that providing interesting activities is not sufficient in itself to ensure effective learning.

… continued

- Challenge. To what extent does this activity make you feel excited or make you want to get involved?

- Skill. To what extent is this activity important to you? To what extent do you feel that it is related to your future goals?

- Interest. To what extent do you wish to be doing this activity? To what extent do you enjoy what you are doing? To what extent is the activity interesting to you? To what extent are you concentrating on the activity?

- Success. To what extent are you feeling successful at the current activity? To what extent are you feeling in control as you work on the current activity?

- Relaxation. To what extent do you feel relaxed rather than anxious while you are doing this activity?

- Self-esteem. To what extent are you living up to your own expectations as you do this activity? To what extent are you feeling good about yourself as you do this activity?

- Cooperation. To what extent do you feel cooperative rather than competitive while you are doing this activity?

Interesting activities.

Although student motivations are diverse, some activities are more intrinsically interesting than others and, therefore, have greater potential to generate learning.

Variety of activities.

The combination — and particularly the range — of experiences in a sequence of teaching activities affects the extent to which students learn from and remember those experiences. Even an activity that has proven very successful in terms of generating student interest can't be used over and over again to the same effect. … We highlight evidence for what teachers understand intuitively: students need to experience a variety of activities of different types.

> *'… the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counter-productive.'*

When students experience a narrow range of classroom activities they rapidly lose the ability to distinguish one activity from another in memory. As a consequence, they lose the ability to recall the curriculum content embedded in those activities. Classroom experiences become not only boringly repetitive but rapidly forgotten … the repeated use of even the most effective of classroom tasks is likely to become counterproductive (p.337)[34]

*   Hansen, D.T. (2002). Dewey's conception of an environment for teaching and learning. *Curriculum Inquiry, 32*(3), pp.267–280.

**   Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Literacy and intrinsic motivation. Daedalus, (Spring), pp.115–140.

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[34] Nuthall, G. (2000). The role of memory in the acquisition and retention of knowledge in science and social studies units. *Cognition and Instruction*, 18 (1), pp.83-139.

Incorporating Student Interests to Encourage their Learning

Students find it easier to stay engaged when what they are learning incorporates topics or activities that they are particularly interested in. Teachers too report personal experiences of positive outcomes when they know enough about their students to be able to integrate individual interests into what is being studied in class.

> "'T-J', he's an amazing little fellow, he's sort of average, just below average, [but] an unbelievable sports person, and he's always happy. We had ERO [here] not long ago and we had to pick some students to be interviewed and I picked T-J because I know he's confident. And the ERO guy said to me later: 'I spoke to this one little guy and he bloody nearly made me cry!' Because they asked him what does he think about reading, and T-J said 'Oh, I actually **hate** reading but I try hard at it'. … He sees me as his role model, because I've been hammering at him all the time about reading — [saying] 'I know you hate reading' but we'll try and find something that you **like** and read about it. Different approaches, you know. And he can see that I'm trying to get through to him the importance of reading and so that's why he **tries**. And that really got through to the ERO guy, and I thought 'Ye-s-s!! **Thank you** T-J!' He was a thorn in my side all year, and then he came through with that!"

> "I actually **hate** reading but I try hard at it."

> "All the time I've been at this school I've tried [to really focus on reading], 'cause it's usually been the boys, especially the Polynesian boys, [who are reluctant readers]. I go 'I know you don't like reading but what **main** five things do you like? Right, now go find books on those things. I know you like rugby.' And they grumble 'There are <u>so</u> many things on rugby!' So I say to them, 'What are the rugby players that you like? In our library we've got rugby biographies, you know. And that's how you **start**. You don't even realise but you're actually improving your reading year and then you can branch out [and read other things you're interested in].' Yes, and one of our boys, he wouldn't read anything, so I said to myself, 'What does he like? Surfing, he's always outside surfing, so when he comes back in, get him to read a surfing magazine'. So that's what I do; he likes surfing magazines, and it has helped him — he's more positive about reading and class-work now."

Year 8 teacher

Seeing students in different learning and social contexts also provides teachers with greater insights about their students' abilities, interests, and needs, which with some creativity can be used to advantage in the classroom.

> "I'd been really interested in trying to work out one of my most difficult kids and I was down at the auditorium after school one day a couple of weeks ago and there he was in the singing group preparing for [a local festival]. And I thought, 'just goes to show, there he is singing along like an angel, doing exactly what he was told!' While he

> "One of my most difficult kids, there he was in the singing group …singing along like an angel, doing exactly what he was told!"
> Year 9 teacher

Darryl's story (Case Study 11) shows how a student who perceives — and experiences — school as largely irrelevant to their interests and goals, can seriously disengage from all learning opportunities at school.

Case Study 11: Relevance of school to student's life

The students most at risk in terms of disengagement from learning and school generally were the ones least likely to nominate a range of subjects or topics they enjoyed, least likely to find much of what they were learning of interest or relevance to them personally, and/or most likely to say that they were experiencing difficulties with a significant proportion of their schoolwork.

Throughout the transition study, from near the end of his time in Year 8 to term 1 in Year 10, Darryl frequently mentioned his desire — and intention — to leave school as soon as he was legally allowed to. He had a strong desire to begin his career as a mechanic, and was impatient with everything at school, as he did not see it as relevant to his future.

By the end of his primary schooling, although he didn't have obvious, significant difficulties with his schoolwork (such as a markedly low reading mastery), Darryl showed a pattern of lower level achievement across his subject areas. Also, according to his Year 8 teacher, he tended to mix with other students most likely to get into trouble, and quite often exhibited social immaturity — rudeness on occasions, and inability to see things from another person's perspective.

By the time he entered secondary school, Darryl was sometimes helping out in a local mechanic's garage, and would have much rather stayed on there full-time than go to secondary school. Consequently, he found little that was positive for him about Year 9, saying he could not see how what they were learning in class was relevant to him either currently or for his future. He did however say that he sometimes liked it when there were practical, hands-on learning activities in class, although these didn't occur nearly often enough in his view.

Darryl 'hung out' with a few other boys at lunchtimes but did not regard them as close friends. He did not have any particular interests other than in cars, did not like reading, did not communicate a great deal with his family at home, and especially not about school, and did not want to engage in the wider life of the school by signing up for any extra-curricular activities.

For Darryl, secondary school was not a place of particular adversity; he had simply 'decided' that it was not relevant to him, and it was likely that without active intervention to persuade him otherwise, he was just going to 'sit out' his time there until he could leave. Although Darryl seemed to be in a much better position than other students who seriously disengage from school, in that he did have a definite, future goal in mind, he nevertheless was still missing out on opportunities to perhaps broaden his horizons or learn more that would help him get the best out of his intended career.

Relating Learning to Real Life; Students Understanding the Purpose of what they are Learning

> *"Science is often seen as something completely foreign and they can't see the point of it. So I try to get them to think about how it applies to home and set questions around it."*
> Year 9 teacher

Findings from an increasing number of recent studies, including our transition study, show that students frequently express a wish to learn in ways that 'relate to real life', and have a clearer understanding of the purpose of what they are learning.

Some concepts, skills, and knowledge are necessary building blocks for subsequent and deeper-level learning, understanding and applications. However, while certain material may be important, it does not necessarily mean that it is inherently fascinating or 'fun' in the ways that students so often state that they want or need it to be.

This can be a potential issue. But when students receive clear, convincing explanations of *why* they have to learn things, this helps them maintain a positive attitude and persevere with a topic which

> *Not all learning material can be 'fun' but convincing reasons for why it is relevant or important can help make up for this.*

they may otherwise have seen as pointless and quickly disengaged from, especially if the material was also difficult.

Teachers gave examples of what they did to encourage students to see how what they were learning at school related to real-life situations and also how they could actively apply that learning.

Although some of the examples represented a great deal of planning and work for those involved (eg, organising students to run the school canteen), other examples illustrate that the same effect can

be achieved on a more manageable, 'everyday' scale (eg, making links between what the students are learning in science to everyday items in their homes).

> *"Science is often seen as something completely foreign and they can't see the point of it. So I always endeavour to put it into real life terms, to put it in the context of something that they are used to in some way. For example, we have just being doing separating liquids and most of the techniques involved in this we use all the time at home without realising it. So I try to get them just to think about how it applies to home and set questions around it. Things like filtering, a sieve is a filter, we use a filter when we make coffee; a centrifuge — things like a washing machine at home use the same principle. All things like that I try and tie in to make it meaningful: using a theme and starting to push things out. And I try and tie things in with TV programmes that I know they watch, CSI ['Crime Scene Investigation'] is good for that, I will use examples from that."*
> Year 9 teacher

> *"When I am doing the workshop classes with them, they may not necessarily want to make a jewellery box but what we do in the workshop are life skills and in the future they may want to put up a shelf and they will have the confidence [from what they learn here] that they can do that, even though they might not see that at first. They won't have to call a builder in. I think it is all about life skills and that's very important that they can see and understand that. So we talk a lot about how what we are doing is relevant to everyday life."*
> Year 9 teacher

When teaching and learning with high relevance for students was occurring in the classes, teachers and students alike reported enjoying and being excited

by the learning and creativity that was occurring, and the positive experiences engendered by cooperative enterprise.

Cole (2005, p.13) made similar observations about the particular importance of teaching and learning that is perceived as relevant by middle years students.

He noted that 'student disinterest can be partly addressed by bringing into the learning program events that young adolescents will get excited about or that open up new horizons for them (eg, speakers who are young people's heroes or youth culture icons or events that provide them with a physical challenge or enable them to learn and demonstrate skills valued by their peers).'

He provides some examples of 'special events' that could be considered for incorporation into the learning programme for Year 9 students, including adventure camps, work shadowing, mini enterprise activities, providing opportunities for students to work on projects involving computer software development or film or multi-media products, 'engaging experts that enable students to engage in practical activities and/or skills development and result in the production of a valued service or product', or 'providing students with the opportunity to engage in a learning challenge that requires intensive effort and support (eg, … repairing a piece of equipment)'.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: It is difficult to learn and stay focused when we are unable to see the *relevance* or *purpose* of what we are learning.

Comment:

The students were not necessarily criticising curriculum *content* per se, although sometimes they were. It was more a case of emphasising that they needed to be provided with convincing reasons or a recognisable context for learning on the occasions when the purpose or relevance of a topic was not readily apparent.

Student suggestions:

(1) Receive clear explanations or demonstrations of why subjects or topics are relevant to them and how they link to everyday life.

For example, while some students were able to appreciate Shakespeare for the 'drama' or the beauty of the language, others could not understand why they needed to study such a long-ago writer in today's world. These students therefore needed an explanation of the valid, deeper-level reasons for doing so, which to them were not obvious.

(2) Learn new concepts by means of 'real life' examples, or experiences.

As an illustration, some students mentioned especially enjoying an assignment on 'careers' because it brought to life the learning concepts. The task was to carry out their own research to discover what qualifications and personal qualities it would take to become an engineer (say) and to then consider the life-style that would be possible for an engineer in terms of salary earned, job requirements, and so on.

Classroom Environment

Students overall often referred to times when disruptive behaviours in class[35] detracted from their learning and engagement.

Some students wished that teachers would intervene more in situations in class where other students' behaviour obstructed their learning.

The students frequently admitted too that they were often at fault themselves, some stating, in effect, that they would have liked teachers to 'rescue them from themselves' — that is, somehow diverting or re-engaging them on the occasions when they knew they were talking too much or were generally inattentive.

> *Student misbehaviour in class is a recurrent theme for many teachers and students, interfering as it does with the processes of teaching and learning.*

Although students in question claimed to be 'unable' to stop these behaviours on their own (the temptation to gossip being 'too strong to resist'), they knew that the result of their disengagement ultimately made it more difficult to keep up in class.

Student misbehaviour in class is a recurrent issue for many teachers as well, interfering as it often does with the processes of teaching and learning. Dealing with disruptive behaviours at the same time as trying to cater for the diverse learning needs of everybody else in the class, is undoubtedly not only taxing but also often a significant challenge for teachers. This challenge is one which may require collaboration with or support from colleagues (and sometimes parents and others, depending on the nature and extent of the problem behaviour) to effectively manage.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: 'We find the classroom environment is not always helpful for our learning.'

Comment:

Students' comments about classroom environment fell into two main categories: that noisy, disruptive classroom environments interfered with their learning — a particular concern among quieter, less assertive students and those already struggling to learn unfamiliar or more difficult material; and that tension, strife or unpleasantness within the classroom did not create a positive atmosphere for learning.

Student suggestions:

More relevant or enjoyable lessons to reduce the temptation to indulge in off-task, disruptive behaviours;

More emphasis on student input into lessons to increase engagement and interest;

Teachers showing that they like and are interested in students;

Teachers intervening to reduce disruptive behaviours without penalising others in the class;

Students taking responsibility for their own learning and behaviour by addressing their tendency to talk too much and not listen or stay on-task.

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[35] Note: 'Student misbehaviour' here refers to relatively low level incidents and not to more serious behavioural issues (eg, active aggression towards others, drug taking) likely to require specialised training and support for teachers and schools.

Appropriate Level of Difficulty for Learning Material

From their review of the literature, McGee et al reported study findings that showed that many students in their first year of secondary school were concerned they were studying too much content that they already knew. This led to boredom.

Evidence from our study also showed that students were not always well placed in terms of starting/continuing levels of study so that at the commencement of their secondary school career, some found the work too easy or not challenging enough, while others found it too difficult. This tended to impact negatively on at least some students' early experiences in their new school and on their developing attitudes to secondary level teaching and learning.

> *Students desired lessons that were more targeted to their needs and abilities and current levels of achievement.*

Accurately establishing students' levels of understanding for ongoing teaching and learning purposes in different subject areas can be complex. This complexity may be deepened at major change points such as the primary to secondary transition, when there is usually a change of schools involved, with people using different ways of assessing students, or information about students that could perhaps better inform decisions about them not always being exchanged or available.

What we learned from students

Issue: The students said: Our class-work is often not at the right level for us: it is either too difficult or not challenging enough.

Comment:

This is a complex issue but effective data and information sharing among those involved in student transitions through school (whether year to year transitions within the same school, transition to another school, or concurrent 'transitions' between teachers/classrooms) can help ensure better targeting of class work for students individually and overall.

Also, effective communication about students, and subsequent practice, need to be based on valid, reliable assessments of students' achievement levels and learning needs, on deeper-level knowledge of how students learn, and greater awareness of the knowledge and skills that students bring to class from their wider lives beyond school.

Student suggestions:

The students themselves did not offer direct suggestions about this issue; they simply identified it as a reason they tended to develop a dislike for a subject or said that it contributed to when they found their learning particularly difficult or particularly unsatisfying. It was clear, though, that students desired 'lessons that were more targeted to their needs and abilities, and current levels of achievement'. This reinforces the importance of teachers regularly checking with students about their reactions to content, including the level of difficulty of that content.

Expectations of Students

Another dimension regarding the level of work students are given is that of the expectations that teachers and others may hold for different students. There is evidence in the research literature (eg, Bishop et al, 2007) that expectations of certain

> *"For some of those kids [in the lowest streamed class], school became meaningless really."*
> RTLB

students or classes of students (high vs lower achieving students, for instance) may sometimes, at least, be based on certain assumptions or stereotypes rather than 'hard data' on the students' abilities and attributes. As well as affecting how students are perceived and treated generally, incorrect assumptions can result in disengaged students who are in danger of dropping out of school.

Hattie (2009, p.259) refers to studies that provide 'a portrait of schools that produced high achievement even though they had previously failed'. A discussion of effective teaching and effective teachers followed. In part, it was stated that 'Effective teachers have high expectations and increase the academic demands on their students (ie, consistently encouraging students to attempt slightly more advanced books and write slightly longer and more complex stories). From the first day of school, effective teachers communicate high expectations for students to self-regulate and take charge of their behaviour and academic engagement.'[36]

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[36] This statement was preceded by other descriptors regarding effective teachers which included: 'Effective teachers do explicit teaching (and reteaching as required) of skills, and this teaching includes modelling and explaining skills, followed by guided student practice. That is, effective teachers show a strong balancing of skills instruction and holistic reading and writing activities. …' (Hattie, 2009, p.259)

As discussed at various points in this document, knowing students as well as possible, including obtaining accurate, up-to-date information about their achievement, knowledge and skills is vital. It leads to better alignment between expectations of students and their reality, helping to maximise previously under-recognised student potential in some cases, or, in the case of students having real difficulties, facilitate effective intervention that is based on accurate analysis of their needs. It also helps ensure that students will remain engaged, successful learners.

> **Findings from our transitions study:**
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> - By the end of Year 9, and early in Year 10, the high achieving students were generally more likely to find the work at secondary school more demanding or challenging than their peers. In contrast, the low achieving students were generally more likely than the high achievers to think that the work at secondary school was easier.
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> - In Years 9 and 10, the low achieving students in mathematics and reading were more likely than the high achievers to consider they were repeating work they had already done.

Effective Pedagogies

In addition to their wish for more opportunities to experience a range of interesting activities to engage them, and undertake learning that was relevant to their lives or personally meaningful, students emphasised the importance of knowing how well they were progressing: not only praise for when they were doing well, but regular, constructive feedback that would help them know how to correct mistakes and focus on areas of weakness.

Heidi's story (Case Study 12) illustrates the critical importance of effective feedback and support for students and also some of the complexities/dilemmas involved in this.

Participating teachers similarly highlighted the need for pedagogies that were responsive to the needs of individuals or different groups of students. Some particularly identified the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies to ensure better outcomes for all students. For example, they made a case for adapting teaching strategies to take into account Pasifika students' more group-focused value system. They felt that many of these students are often disadvantaged in the 'individualistic' environment of secondary school because they hesitate to put themselves forward or 'take risks' with their learning.

Learning needs to be interesting to engage students but interest alone does not ensure learning.

Another important consideration raised, and emphasised by Aitken and Sinnema (2008), is that although learning needs to be interesting in order to engage students, interest alone does not ensure learning: clear identification of learning goals, effective pedagogies, and appropriate monitoring and assessment of student progress are all essential as well.

Case Study 12: Effective pedagogies — feedback and support for student

Some students have difficulties because of unrealistic or distorted perceptions of their own abilities, perhaps exacerbated at times by ineffective or misleading feedback.

Heidi appeared to have an inappropriately elevated view of her own achievement. She talked enthusiastically about her plans for the future in a specialised, professional career field and said she spent much of her spare time doing activities in a special workbook (of her own making) that she perceived would help her progress towards this goal. She also reported loving to do her homework and wished she had more of it. Sadly, her achievement levels in maths and science in particular, but in other subjects as well, were well below what she would need if she was to achieve her desired goal. They were also at quite a low level generally. Heidi's parents expressed their satisfaction at Heidi's progress at school and her committed, hardworking approach and did not appear to be aware of the reality of Heidi's achievement levels. She was actively encouraged by her parents to spend time on school-related tasks rather than pursue social activities beyond the family.

Heidi's case illustrates a real dilemma faced by schools, teachers, and parents: that is, how to effectively provide feedback that will lead to genuine learning and progress, without crushing the spirit of a child whose enthusiasm for reaching their future goals, albeit based more on wishes and dreams than reality, is to be admired.

A delicate situation such as this highlights the need to know a student well in terms of range of interests, what motivates them, and how they would cope with feedback contrary to their own beliefs about themselves and other factors: for example, while Heidi advised that she had a number of friends at school, other information suggested that those she designated as a 'friend' were more accurately simply acquaintances or fellow classmates whom she would have *liked* to become friends, further indicating that Heidi often lived in a world of her own imagining. There is also a strong need as early as possible in the student's schooling for sound data on their levels of achievement, strengths and weaknesses, in order to build more meaningfully and positively on the skills and knowledge that they do have and to help with any emotional issues.

From their review of the research literature, McGee et at stated:

Primary students often look forward to greater independence and less supervision after transition, but by the end of their first year of secondary school, comments from the same students show that they actually need more care and attention from teachers to help their academic achievement. Researchers have interpreted this to mean that too much independence for students too soon may come to mean lack of learning guidance and support.

The following is an extract from Aitken and Sinnema's 2008 publication *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences/Tikanga ā Iwi* — Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES] (p.217), produced for the Ministry of Education.

'Caution: It is not sufficient that activities be interesting'

'There is a strong tendency to equate motivation with learning. Much of what goes on in classrooms is based on the belief that if students are interested and involved in an activity, they will learn from it. Being attentive and engaged is equated with learning. However, students can be highly motivated and actively engaged in interesting classroom activities, yet not be learning anything new. Learning requires motivation, but motivation does not necessarily lead to learning.'*

'In many of the studies [we have reported], the 'interesting activity' that engaged students and supported their learning worked because other things were going on that capitalised on that interest. What is important is that the interesting activities … align to the important outcomes. The two … should go hand-in-hand.'

Interest	Alignment
Design experiences that interest students	Align experiences to important outcomes

'Interesting activities, then, are necessary but not sufficient. Tumblety** notes this point in relation to role play in history [for example]: "[It] may lead to greater student interest in the topic but almost certainly does not lead to better academic performance in itself" (p.4). While teachers need to be aware of the extent to which activities interest and engage their students, they must also attend to the longer-term goal of the enterprise, which is the achievement of important learning outcomes.'

* Nuthall, G. (2007). *The hidden lives of learners.* Wellington: NZCER, p.35.

** Tumblety, J. (2004). *Evaluating role play in history teaching.* Paper presented at the 6th annual Conference for the Development of Teaching and Learning in History, University of Oxford.

Student Responsibility

The discussion so far has focused more on the role of teachers alone in promoting student engagement in their learning. However, feedback from participating teachers and parents, and from students themselves, emphasises that students too must take some responsibility for their own learning. In other words, to realise that not all learning can necessarily be 'fun', that application,

> *"We have to be careful that we don't take away the opportunities for them to take some responsibility for their own learning."*
> Year 9 teacher

willingness to learn, open-mindedness (such as giving learning material that is not instantly attractive a 'chance'), resiliency and perseverance are all important attributes to bring to any learning situation. These skills may need to be actively taught, and fostered both at home and at school.

Summary Comments

Of the considerable range of factors that students felt impacted in important ways on their learning and achievement and attitudes to subjects before and after the transition, the message that predominated was: 'learning is easiest and most satisfying when the material and the ways in which we are undertaking it are interesting, relevant or personally meaningful, and enjoyable.'

Fundamental to achieving the goal of interested, committed (young adolescent) learners is knowing the students well, so as to better establish their prior achievement levels, their learning strengths and weaknesses, particular interests, and also the particular pedagogies to which they relate best and will be most likely effective for helping them attain learning goals.

Other key points to keep in mind include the following:

- Input from the students themselves should be actively taken into account as early as possible as part of the process for addressing student disengagement.

- Students may often need very *deliberate* or specific guidance or demonstrations to help them see how what they are learning is applicable to their lives and that certain knowledge and skills acquired in one context can be meaningfully transferred to other contexts.

- An important area of ongoing focus is that of how to encourage or enable students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and (have the opportunity to) more often actively contribute to improving conditions for their own learning and achievement. Such a focus might include:

  - teaching or motivating students (through innovative approaches) to: develop good organisational and other self-help skills, such as an ability to seek out information that they need; listen more; and engage in less off-task talking and other disruptive behaviours in class;

  - helping students understand that not *everything* they need to learn can be 'fun', and that qualities such as perseverance and an open, enquiring mind, are necessary if they are to gain satisfaction from their learning and, like any favourite role models they might have, reach certain goals for their future.

In addition, as part of the processes of getting to know students well, actively seeking student input, and assisting students to become more responsible for their own learning, it would be valuable to encourage students to articulate what they mean when they describe aspects of teaching and

learning at school as 'boring', as they often find it difficult to be more specific. It would be helpful for themselves and their teachers if they were to learn to better define and communicate their thinking and feelings. It would also be advantageous if they were encouraged to think about and offer constructive ideas on what would make learning contexts more satisfying and to work in partnership with their teachers and each other to achieve this.

Questions to Consider in Relation to Supporting Student Engagement

Learning in a variety of interesting ways

➢ As teachers, what approaches have we found to be *most successful* in engaging students in activities in our classrooms in order to bring about desired learning outcomes? What key points can be derived from the examples we have come up with that we think could helpfully inform our ongoing practice in the classroom to ensure students are engaged by their learning? Similarly, what lessons can be learned from any *less successful* practices identified*?*

➢ Today's students are growing up in a heavily technology-orientated world. It is also a world in which the predominant media has tended to adopt a 'short attention bytes' approach. How might this impact on how students prefer to learn at school?

Incorporating student interests in their learning

➢ It has been established that it is important to incorporate individual students' interests into lesson content as much as possible. What have we found to be helpful, practical strategies for successfully achieving this?

Relating learning to real life;students' understanding the purpose of what they are learning

➢ Student feedback indicates that they often disengage from material that is not obviously relevant or useful to them. Their feedback further suggests that it is often *assumed* that they understand why they are learning these less obviously relevant or useful things. How can we in our individual classrooms ensure that all students receive clear, valid explanations or reasons for what they are being asked to learn (especially in relation to more 'obscure' topics)?

Classroom environment and relationships

➢ There is sometimes divided opinion over which comes first in the classroom: students being well engaged in their learning, or effective behaviour management. What links are there between student misbehaviour in class, student levels of engagement or disengagement in their learning, and/or their prior levels of learning and achievement?

➢ What strategies have we, in our different subject contexts/classroom settings, found to be successful in dealing with problem behaviours from students, particularly in relation to teaching and learning? For example, how important is it to establish that work in class is at an appropriate level of challenge for the students to keep them on task?

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Expectations of students

➢ What 'conscious' expectations do we have for the students we teach? Do our expectations vary for different classes or students?

➢ How well do the expectations we hold of students align with their skills and potential? How do we know?

➢ Is there anything we might need to do as teachers in this school to achieve better alignment between expectations and student potential in order to maximise positive outcomes for students overall?

Sharing collective knowledge, experience and expertise

➢ How could we (more readily) share our experience and knowledge with one another about proven ways of achieving a positive learning environment for all middle years students within the classroom? For instance, would it be valuable to put in place particular structures or processes in the school to ensure that this happened and was sustained?