APPROACHES TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: DOES IDEOLOGY MATTER?

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the concept of "student engagement" as an inescapably ideological term. The paper begins by problematizing politically neutral iterations of student engagement in the literature on school improvement and school effectiveness. Then, drawing on data collected during a much larger national study of student engagement, it provides an analysis of differential meanings of student engagement across three ideological lenses: a techno-rational, an interpretive/student-centred, and a critical/transformative lens. Examples of policy and practice in action in schools and classrooms are posited as illustrative of the various ideological lenses, and educational/political consequences of such stances are explored. Culminating in an argument for a critical/transformative pedagogy as providing possibilities for a just and humane education, the paper concludes that ideology does, indeed, matter.

FAÇONS D'ABORDER L'ENGAGEMENT DES ÉLÈVES : L'IDÉOLOGIE COMPTE-T-ELLE ?

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article analyse la notion d'« engagement des élèves » comme terme inéluctablement idéologique. Les auteurs commencent par établir la problématique des itérations politiquement neutres de l'engagement des élèves dans la documentation consacrée à l'amélioration et à l'efficacité scolaire. S'inspirant ensuite des données recueillies dans le cadre d'une étude nationale de beaucoup plus grande envergure sur l'engagement des élèves, elles proposent une analyse des sens différentiels de l'engagement des élèves dans trois optiques idéologiques : technonationale, interprétative/axée sur les élèves et critique/transformationnelle. Des exemples des politiques et des pratiques à l'oeuvre dans les écoles et les salles de cours illustrent les diverses optiques idéologiques et les auteurs étudient les conséquences éducatives et politiques de ces points de vue. Elles terminent leur article en affirmant que l'idéologie compte effectivement en arguant pour une pédagogique critique/transformationnelle qui offre des possibilités d'éducation juste et humaine.

Today's citizens are confronted by numerous reports of schools in which student discipline seems to take precedence over student learning. Educators are bombarded with programs and packages designed to decrease bullying, improve student self-esteem and make schools safer for all students. Despite some evidence that students who are involved in positive social relationships as well as in academic activities are more likely to be "successful" in school, less attention seems to be paid by theorists, practitioners, and the general public to the topic of student engagement than to the challenges of behaviour control or modification. Indeed, one could argue, based on some evidence, that if more attention were paid to the latter, there would be less need to spend as much time and energy on the former.

Nevertheless, the common attitudes are symptomatic, we believe, of how many educators seek rational, technical, and relatively rapid solutions to what are, in fact, deeply rooted and pervasive educational and social problems. This tension was clearly evident in both the research methods and the interpretation of the findings of a national student of student engagement conducted between 1996 and 1998. The purpose of this paper (and of the study) was to better understand how educators might conceptualize student engagement in ways that promote the twin goals of social justice and academic excellence.

To explore this topic, we first present an overview of the national study, then provide an analysis of the literature on student engagement, and explore some theoretical and ideological perspectives that may help us to assess both the literature and our data regarding student achievement. We share some of the data from the five elementary schools in this study (largely in the form of vignettes), and conclude with a discussion and interpretation of the data and some implications for educators wanting to make schools more inclusive, respective, and engaging for students.

THE NATIONAL STUDY

The national study, entitled *Student engagement in learning and school life* (Smith, Donahue, & Vibert, 1998) and funded by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation with additional support by the Vancouver Foundation, was conceptualized as a qualitative, longitudinal, pan-national study. It involved three teams of researchers, five provinces, and ten schools (five elementary and five secondary), two in each designated province. We selected schools not because they were exemplary, but because they represented a range of programs, communities, and ideologies, with the common characteristic that educators in each school expressed both an interest in the topic and a desire to better understand, and perhaps improve, their own practice. Among its major aims, the study proposed to "describe how students engage in learning and school life" within these school contexts, as

well as "analyze context-specific policies, practices, and conditions that facilitate student engagement within various contexts." (p. 2)

Once access was negotiated with each participating district and school, researchers and graduate research assistants spent many hours (normally one day a week for two years) in each school, talking to students individually and in focus groups, interviewing educators, observing classrooms, attending student activities, and just "hanging out" where students congregated.

Although the research team met at least biennially, and all espoused qualitative research paradigms, differences emerged among the team in terms of epistemology and ideology. While these differences made the final analysis and interpretation more complex and sometimes more tense than we originally predicted, they also helped us to make overt and explicit the different lenses through which student engagement is often seen by both theorists and practitioners, and ultimately led us to identify the three lenses we describe in this paper. Some of us seemed content to observe and to question and to take what we saw and heard at face value; those analyses emphasized understanding and description. Some took a more critical or radical approach, identifying silences and interrogating what was said and not said; these analyses offered interpretations that challenged the status quo in ways consistent with how other writers (Capper, 1993; Foster, 1986; Reyes, Velez, & Peña, 1993; Riehl, 2000) use the term *critical* to describe approaches that question how such constructs as class, power, culture, and ethnicity affect the social structure.

EXAMINING THE LITERATURE

The literature on school reform, school improvement, and effective schools tends to talk *about* students, and perhaps even be *for* students, but as noted by Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996), until recently very little research has focused on listening to and understanding students themselves. Nevertheless, it has long been known that "as students move through the grades from elementary to secondary, they become *increasingly bored and alienated from school*" (Fullan, 1991, p. 182, emphasis in original). The focus on student engagement is an attempt to understand why this is true and how to overcome increasing student alienation. Student engagement, therefore, is sometimes related to discussions of school improvement and school effectiveness. One argument is that as schools improve and become more effective, students are more engaged and perform better (according to whatever criteria the school has established). Conversely, having students more engaged is often a marker of school improvement.

Within these conceptions, student engagement is often defined in terms of positive school culture and ethos (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Kohn,

1993) and a series of proximal and distal variables (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1991). Proximal variables include psychological measures, classroom instruction and management as well as teacher and student interactions, and the home environment. Distal variables include such elements as legislation and school and district policies that are much more remotely connected to students' experiences of school.

School effectiveness is often defined to include such categories such as strong instructional leadership, a strong discipline policy, a clear sense of purpose, evidence of parental involvement, teacher empowerment, and a focus on student learning (Clark, Lotto, & Astuto, 1984). School improvement is seen as a way of understanding how schools change consistent with the development of these desired characteristics.

In addition to these foci on the school, more recent approaches also focus more directly on the student. Ruddick, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) found six principles that make a significant difference to learning: respect, fairness, autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support, and security. They noted that their effectiveness lies in the "student-centered perspective" with which these principles are framed. Others (see Coleman, Collinge, & Tabin, 1995) noted that good schools develop relationships with students' homes so that "students see home and school promoting the same educational values, . . . and school and home as sharing a concern about the educational progress of the individual student" (p. 167). Phelan, Cao, and Davidson (1994) discuss students' four intersecting worlds: self, family, school, and peers, and demonstrate that congruence among these worlds helps to ease the passage from one world to another.

In several major studies of student engagement, Newmann and colleagues (1981, 1986, 1989, 1992) developed increasingly complex understandings:

> We define engagement in academic work as the students' psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote engagement is a construct used to describe an inner quality of concentration and effort to learn. . . . Engagement describes more than motivation. . . . By focusing on the extent to which students demonstrate active interest, effort, and concentration in the specific work that teachers design, engagement calls special attention to the social contexts that help activate underlying motivation. . . . (cited in Smith, W. J. Donahue, H. D. & Vibert, A. B., 1998, p.12-13)

In their 1992 study of engagement in secondary schools, they identified factors that affect student engagement in academic work: school membership (clarity of purpose, fairness, personal support, success, and caring) and authentic work (extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interests, sense of ownership, connection to the "real world," and fun) [p. 18].

We raise several concerns related to this body of literature. The first is that correlation is often interpreted as causality. Thus, for example, schools that exhibit certain characteristics are described as "effective" without any examination of whether the ascribed characteristics pre-existed or whether they developed after the school was identified as effective. Does the school have a high percent of students described as involved in academic pursuits (as evidenced by high grades, usually on standardized tests) because of something the educators do or does the engaged student body reflect characteristics of home and community? In other words, is it possible to find evidence of increased understanding of, or passion for, a given topic? This is a difficult question.

A second problem is that engagement is often defined in ways that focus too narrowly on the individual student and his or her willingness to become involved with a task identified and initiated by the teacher. If a student is then engaged in learning, it follows according to the definition of Newmann and colleagues (1992), that the teacher has found the conditions that promote student engagement. On the other hand, if a student is not engaged, it is more likely that a "deficit mentality" will take over, assigning blame and responsibility to the student for lack of interest, effort, or motivation. Engagement, separated from its social, cultural and political contexts, is a contradiction that ignores deeply embedded understandings about the purpose and nature of engagement itself.

A third problem we note with these efforts to identify and understand notions of school effectiveness or student engagement is that they arise from rational, technical, and functional ways of thinking about schooling. Given the complexity and diversity of today's world, and the traditional focus of many schools, how might it be possible, for example, for students to see any connections among home, school, and peer values, unless we spend a considerable amount of time trying to understand each world and to identify ways in which each might be broadened, indeed reconceptualized, in order for overlapping values and assumptions to be identified?

Seeking to identify generalized and generalizable school-based characteristics stems from an epistemology that Burrell and Morgan (1985) would describe as objectivist, aimed at regulation and understanding the status quo. It tends to be decontextualized, related to the quest for "grand theory" and focuses on finding objective markers of effectiveness and engagement that fail to take into consideration either the contexts or the purposes of schooling.

To some extent, both the body of literature on student engagement and the initial McConnell study exhibit these difficulties. Each often presents naive notions of student engagement, as though students' various engagements in learning and schooling differ only by degree, and prior questions about what

it means to engage in schooling and how we might recognize such engagements are already settled. Within such conceptions, students may engage more or less or not at all, but the possible meanings of engagement itself remain largely uncontested. The literature emanating from the school improvement and school effectiveness movements, in particular, tends to reify student engagement, rushing to identify and measure those conditions which may encourage or impede it without pausing to consider thornier questions such as *what do we mean by engagement? engagement in what? for what purposes? to what ends?* In the process of the student engagement study we learned that the pursuit of such questions sometimes unsettles people, revealing fundamental disagreements about educational purposes which, in turn, inform educators' (and researchers') conceptions of what engagement might mean and how it might look in practice.

Unless we address such questions, we remain firmly situated in unchallenged assumptions and traditional understandings and analyses of schooling that take as their starting point a belief that the present system may need tweaking, but that it is generally performing the social and political functions that those with decision-making power deem desirable. School improvement from within this tradition is conceptualized according to how well an individual school demonstrates the specified criteria, without consideration of the socio-economic, political, or cultural context of each school. Student engagement is identified with both compliance and involvement. Hence if a child is following instructions, quietly completing a worksheet in math, (and especially if the child is attaining a high percent of correct answers), she or he is considered to be engaged. The explanation usually includes reference to positive relationships with the teacher, some degree of inner motivation and perhaps even satisfaction, and a certain level of self-efficacy. There is no interpretation of whether the child is complying to avoid punishment, whether any learning is taking place, or whether the child understands the concepts behind the activity. Too often, simple compliance and involvement with, or completion of, an activity are regarded as synonymous with student engagement.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

We believe that this way of thinking about student engagement does little to advance our understanding of student engagement in learning and school life. Indeed, in order to better understand the concept of student engagement, we posit three analytical frames or perspectives that may be useful to educators who wish to create schools that are more socially just and academically sound: a rational-technical perspective, an interpretive perspective, and a critical perspective. The three perspectives through which we analyze engagement here never appear in the messy realities of school

practices in the discrete or explicit manner the process of analysis may suggest. In the McConnell study, we generally found in each of the schools classes, programs, spaces and moments that indicated different perspectives. Though each of the schools tended to express one dominant perspective, a central school culture and personality, contradictory moments appeared in all. Unsurprisingly, we found the critical perspective by far the least common. Below, we briefly introduce these perspectives, then examine what each might mean for engagement in practice by reference to vignettes from the schools.

By a "rational/technical" lens on education we are referring to that set of beliefs and practices that approaches education as a largely technical problem of most effectively transmitting a given, fixed, and taken-for-granted curriculum most efficiently to the greatest number of students. Through this lens, the primary purposes of education are preparation for participation in the world, also a given, and successful competition in the labour market. The number of students who told us that the purpose of school was to allow them to go to a good university and get a good job or to prepare them to solve problems at work speaks to the cultural pervasiveness of this lens in education. From such a perspective, engagement is not an end in itself, but an instrument through which the central problem of schooling may be more effectively addressed. Characteristic of a rational/technical lens are a guiding interest in grades and scores on standardized tests as a form of "cultural capital" (one school in the engagement study was included partly because it claimed the highest standardized test scores in the province), and a stubborn belief in the potential efficacy of the "right" program or package or publication in solving just about any educational problem. Viewed through a rational/technical lens, student engagement tends to attach itself to the peripheries of school life: that is, it is evident in participation in student council, band programs, dances, sports, and the extra-curricular.

An "interpretive/student-centred" lens encompasses those sets of beliefs and practices that centre the student as an individual. Through this lens, the purpose of education becomes self-discovery and individual fulfilment, so that students come to know their own strengths and build upon them, recognize their own weaknesses and develop strategies for accounting for them. The language (if not entirely the practice) of interpretive/student-centred education currently pervades the mission statements of boards, districts and schools, asserting that "each child is an individual" engaged on a "journey of lifelong learning." Characteristic of an interpretive/student-centred lens is curriculum located in students' interests and an insistence on student choice and autonomy within the classroom and curriculum (more than one school in the study enacted reading and writing curricula located in students' choices). From an interpretive, student-

centred perspective, engagement involves productive students working autonomously and effectively on projects of some particular interest to them and over which they have some control.

Finally, a "critical/transformative" lens encompasses those sets of beliefs and practices through which education is imagined as a potentially transformative process in the lives of individuals and communities. Through this lens, the purpose of education is not so much preparatory as urgent; that is, it is the purpose of education to take up, examine, and work on the world as it presents itself to students (and teachers) here and now. A critical lens commits educators to take seriously a number of concerns: the democratic purposes of schooling; the inevitability of the political dimensions of education and teaching; the importance of dealing explicitly with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and all embodiments of social difference as a concern for social justice; and the centrality of the notion of 'praxis' (Freire, 1998). Characteristic of a critical pedagogy is an explicit taking up of questions and issues often deemed sensitive or controversial within schools, and a view of curriculum as grounded in the lives and experiences of students. From a critical perspective, engagement in learning and school life is a form of engagement in and with the world at large.

Some underlying criteria

These perspectives may perhaps be best understood if they are situated in some criteria for understanding what occurs within a given school, whether one is thinking about governance, curriculum, or student engagement. In 1995, Kincheloe and Steinberg argued that the system of meaning that underlies what occurs in a given school should be just, democratic, empathetic, and optimistic. Justice is defined, in part, by Farrell's (1999) concepts of access, sustainability, outputs, and outcomes. Hence, engagement that is just would ensure that all students have equality of access to a particular activity, whether academic or extra-curricular; they would sustain interest and achievement; learn at relatively similar levels; and have similar opportunities beyond school related to the activity in question. If, for example, one were to consider football as an activity that might engage teenage boys, one would want to examine whether the sport were open to all students regardless of socio-economic level or ethnic background, whether certain groups of students tended to be cut more quickly, to play less, and to have fewer opportunities beyond the school for further engagement with the activity, and to examine ways in which a football culture shores up dominant masculinities and contributes to gender violence. Similarly, if one were to consider advanced academic subjects as are often found in advanced placement programs, or gifted programs (where students are often found to be deeply engaged), one would also want to know whether all groups of students were represented (relatively proportionately) in a certain

program, whether they remained involved and enrolled, whether they achieved in similar ways, whether the program provided similar life opportunities for students' beyond school, and the extent to which various people's knowledges were represented within its curriculum. Gifted programs that recruit primarily from white and Asian students may actually engage them in advanced math, science, or humanities activities, but unless the programs also recruit First Nations, Punjabi, or Filipino students, and those who may be economically disadvantaged, we would not describe them as "just."

Democratic is a criterion that implies participation, another word often identified with student engagement in learning and school life. Here again, unless all groups of students both believe they can participate and are actually able to do so, the activity cannot be considered democratic. Thus, students in one high school in our student engagement study who indicated that participation in the school yearbook seemed limited to a certain clique of students, were reflecting a type of engagement that was neither just nor democratic.

Kincheloe and Steinberg's (1995) criterion of empathy relates to the creation of a caring climate in which all students feel respected and safe within the school environment. Yet, despite students' comments that having a positive relationships with teachers and peers is often critical to their engagement, we found that students from home backgrounds that most resembled the dominant culture of the school were most likely to develop positive relationships with others; on the other hand, those who came from homes in which English was not spoken, homes of poverty, homes in which there was alcoholism, or homes with a single parent, were also least likely to see or hear themselves reflected in the curriculum (broadly conceived) or to develop positive relationships. In other words, unless educators make special efforts to include those who do not naturally develop friendships or feel welcome to join in school activities, the educational environment of the school is unlikely to appear to be empathic for all students.

Finally, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1995) identify the concept of optimism as a criterion for the system of meaning within a school. This is the notion that formal education should enhance life's choices and chances for all students, and not simply those who begin school with the most advantages. In some ways this is the promise of the term *engagement*, whether it refers to the human promise of life-long partnership or to the engagement of a machine that is about to perform its desired activity. Student engagement in learning and school life, as we will demonstrate, can go beyond simply having students perform academic exercises directed by the teacher, or becoming temporarily involved in a sport or extracurricular activity; rather, it can form the basis for social, cultural, political, and intellectual participation in life both within and beyond school.

Engagement from a rational technical perspective

When we consider engagement from a rational and technical lens, we find that it falls short of these criteria, in part because it seems to be a relatively mechanical and superficial concept. As Burrell and Morgan (1985) have indicated, a rational and technical approach is firmly grounded in an objectivist understanding of the status quo, an approach that could well be equated with counting the numbers of student involved in particular activities or "on task" at any given moment, or completing assigned tasks. It would be manifest through objective measures such as surveys, observations, and perhaps an analysis of test data, but one would not go beneath the surface to attempt to understand the meaning students attributed to a given activity or their motivation for participation.

Two particular qualities stood out for us in our data that we deemed illustrative of this approach. The first was the notion of teacher initiation; the second of what we called "doing for, rather than doing with." In every case, teachers were well intentioned, exerting admirable initiative and effort to involve students in numerous activities within the school. In one school, for example, the report from the research project contained a subheading called *Activities that Engage: Teacher Directed*. In this section the authors (Sparkes & Smith, 1998) described teacher-directed journal writing, project work, and computer activities as well as activities "not geared to academic learning but designed to teach the students about taking responsibility" (p. 115). The latter included assigning jobs to ensure that the classroom was clean and orderly, from "chair tucker" to "coat checker" to hamster feeder. Our colleagues wrote, "Students seemed to take these jobs very seriously.... Judging from the excitement of the students, being chosen for such a job was looked upon as an honour" (p. 115). Another example, from the same school, was the Christmas bazaar, an activity initiated and directed by teachers and produced with the help of parents, as a way of providing students with an opportunity to buy gifts for others at affordable prices, while at the same time, raising funds for the school. These activities are of course common to most elementary schools and are illustrative of teachers trying, in various ways, to develop both pedagogical and social activities in which students may be both involved and interested.

The other dominant aspect of what we identify as a rational-technical approach is adults "doing for" rather than "doing with" students. This differs from the previous teacher-initiated activities in the underlying deficit attitudes and assumptions we frequently heard expressed. Teachers often explained that they were taking a certain course of action because either the students or their parents would be incapable of showing more initiative, deeper understanding, or more complex engagement.

In one school with a culturally diverse student body, but an unusually high proportion of students coming from high poverty communities, teachers spoke about the disruption of "welfare Wednesday" a time when children anticipated the arrival of cheques. Here the explicit goal of the staff was to ensure that school was a safe place for students (obviously a necessary and desirable condition for learning) and that on the days before and after "welfare Wednesday," they "kept the lid on" student excitement or disappointment. One teacher explained that "the school is one of the few places where children feel safe as many don't feel safe in their homes." The goal of providing a safe and secure place for students was also extended to parents, and several couches were placed in the foyer to create an inviting place for parents to come and sit, interact, and wait for their children.

In this school, one adult for every four children provided a multiplicity of services; programs and activities were conducted *for* rather than *with* students. For example, students were given "awards" at weekly assemblies but had no leadership roles in the assemblies; a ceremony was held to rename the school, but students reported that they had never been asked for their opinions; parents were invited to bring ethnic food for a multicultural celebration, but students were expected to eat the "regular meals" in the cafeteria. Perhaps the most telling illustration of the notion of "doing for" was dinner held one fall to celebrate school opening. A free meal was provided and many parents and teachers were in attendance. The next week, the principal shared with the researchers that he had intended to introduce the new teachers, but decided not to. "It couldn't be structured," he said, "the school is unstructured because you can't superimpose structure, because they [the parents] don't understand it" (Shields et al, 1998, p. 84). It was this attitude that neither parents nor students were competent nor capable that led teachers to take on the responsibility for planning and to direct all activities that went on in the school.

The examples from these two schools could be supplemented by many others. The point is that student engagement under a technical-rational model is primarily considered to be a function of educators developing and directing activities for both learning and out-of-class engagement, with students being engaged if they respond positively and seem to participate willingly and relatively enthusiastically. The contrast between this and the interpretive or child-centered approach is striking.

Engagement from an interpretive/student-centred perspective

Engagement is central to an interpretive/student-centred perspective on pedagogy; in fact, it could be argued that within this perspective, curriculum is an attempt to link various knowledges with topics which individually engage students. Hence, students learn reading and writing by using them

to explore topics or subjects of interest to themselves, social studies by choosing places they want to learn about, and so on. Advocates of student-centred pedagogies envision engagement as implicit in active learning, self-motivation and reflective learning, shared goal setting and student choice. During the national engagement study, we found instances of student-centred classrooms in which students were seen as capable and responsible and were encouraged to choose projects in keeping with their own interests, to engage in independent research, to make decisions about the substance and process of their projects, and to contribute to evaluating their own work. While the student-centred perspective on engagement produces more interesting and dignified classrooms, questions need to be raised about the potential of this pedagogy to engage substantive inquiry and about the openness of the pedagogy to *all* students.

A particular trend within such elementary schools serves to illustrate the point. Each of the schools identifying themselves as student-centred empha-sized student choice and active learning within curriculum. Students worked individually or in self-directed pairs and small groups on a variety of tasks and projects, choosing from the menu of elementary classroom subjects, as the teachers circulated, helping as requested. In any given classroom mo-ment, students carried out science experiments, researched Canadian prov-inces for presentation to the class, wrote stories and reports, researched animal survival strategies, charted frequency percentages for various phe-nomena, often choosing from a number of continuing projects and organ-izing their own time at least within the structure of classroom schedules. While in these instances students exercised some control over their own work, student-centred pedagogies beg a more serious consideration of the boundaries within which students are choosing and of the criteria regulating their choices. On occasion, students complained that when it had been their turn, all the more attractive choices had gone, leaving them with topics like "helicopters" or "insects" in which they had little interest.

The productions of student-centred autonomy offer few surprises: in a group project on drugs, students warned of the dangers of marijuana, but did not address the question of officially sanctioned drugs; they created totem poles and Haida villages, but did not debate the issue of First Nations land claims or examine how the Haida live today; they produced informative documents on Canadian provinces, but did not take up the historical struggles among peoples on which their maps were based. We found no instances in student-centred classrooms in which the projects students chose spontaneously questioned officially sanctioned knowledge. Nor would we expect other-wise. As Ursula Kelly (1995) has argued in the context of examining girls' choices in student-centred literacy pedagogy, choice is always made from the available. Interruptions in culturally and educationally sanctioned dis-courses and official knowledges are not readily available to students who are

left alone to choose, especially in the context of schooling, where the "right choices" are powerfully inculcated in institutional habits, routines, and in the very air. What, in this context, might student choice mean?

We would argue that it was not accidental that the schools in our study making the strongest claims to student-centred pedagogy were located in and served professional and middle class communities. From the perspective of a student-centred pedagogy, engagement in active learning is closely associated with the values, aims, and dispositions of the professional classes: that is, students learn the value of individual choice, of individual responsibility and independent work, of order and organization, of politeness, cooperation, team-work, turn-taking, productivity and good management. There was no evidence that these students were encouraged to raise political issues, and in fact, such issues may well have been seen to violate the norms of politeness. In one instance, after a teacher of young children had commented that the girls were much noisier than the boys and a young girl challenged her with "that's because there are *more* girls," the issue was (from within this perspective) prudently dropped.

In practice, the emphasis on active learning and student choice within student-centred pedagogy may manifest another "hidden curriculum" (Portelli, 1996), in this case a concern for inculcating habits of work naturalized within those particular social classes it would seem this pedagogy is for and about. If student choice actually refers to student preferences within such a narrow and taken-for-granted range of curriculum possibilities, this is a clear example of "authority gone underground" for which student-centred pedagogy has been criticized (Walkerdine, 1983), in which the *appearance* of shared power and decision-making is maintained, providing students and teachers make the right choices. By failing to act in the service of interrupting and questioning the available, i.e. the values implicit in particular ways of working and talking and thinking, a student-centred perspective on engagement defaults to the conservative, techno-rational position, and may become simply a more friendly method of encouraging "on-task behaviour."

Engagement from a critical perspective

Engagement from a critical perspective bears, on the surface, certain similarities to student-centred conceptions of engagement. Like student-centred pedagogies, critical pedagogies are located in the life experiences of students. The central difference is in the meaning of life experiences: while student-centred pedagogies locate engagement in students' personal and individual interests and choices, critical pedagogies locate engagement in their communal and social interests.

We found it compelling, if not surprising, that the schools in which student engagement was conceived (at least in some spaces) in terms of a critical pedagogy were located in and served high poverty communities. We made various sense of this phenomenon: these were sites in which more traditional ways of doing school have been notably and sometimes spectacularly unsuccessful, and hence different approaches are clearly called for. Further, the nature of teachers' and students' lives and work within such communities was itself socially and politically instructive, inevitably denying the possibility of an "apolitical" stance. In this section, we draw on examples from one of the elementary schools in the study to illustrate the possibilities suggested there for a critical perspective on engagement.

Generally speaking, the elementary school in which we saw examples of critical practice did not engage a traditional conception of curriculum, that is, the official curriculum as a given and linear prescription of the disciplines, implemented grade by grade. Instead there was in the school an overarching, school-wide philosophy informing, modifying and directing traditional academic curriculum as represented by the province's public schools program. This curriculum was similar to the "hidden curriculum" of traditional schooling (Portelli, 1996) in that it addressed questions of appropriate ways of being, speaking, and acting in school, but, in this case, the hidden curriculum was explicit, negotiated, and dynamic. We thought the central impulse of this school-wide curriculum was best captured by one of the administrators, who referenced Aristotle's question: "Since I cannot be entirely selfish and live a good life, what does it mean to live a good life with other people?" This question was taken up in and through the official curriculum as well as in everyday events in the life of the school, and exploration of it was grounded in the lives of the children and community to whom the school belonged. It was this grounding of curriculum in communal lives and concerns that prompted us to call it a "curriculum of life" (see, for instance, Portelli and Vibert, 2001).

Characteristic of a curriculum of life at this school was a refusal to skirt potentially controversial or sensitive issues. Racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks, for instance, rarely went unheard. Teachers and, increasingly, students and parents addressed them in the hallways, on the busses, and on the playground, and frequently such incidents became the ground of curriculum. When one grade six boy told another not to be "such a girl," the class launched a study of gendered language, researching, charting, and graphing girls' and boys' reactions to various common proverbs and sayings – and addressing part of the grade six math curriculum in the process. Similarly, after the school's innovative curriculum had been the subject of a local newspaper story and some community members objected to the paper's characterization of the school as high poverty, two teachers brought

the issue into the classroom. Consequently, the children held a discussion of the manner in which poverty is constructed to become the fault of the victim in our culture. In this way, a social justice curriculum was an embedded, daily approach to questions of social issues as they arose in the school and community and was central to classroom discussions and projects.

Incidents that called for disciplinary action were also often handled as an instance for pedagogy. On one occasion, a few students were caught for shoplifting sunglasses from a local pharmacy when they attempted a playground resale. Subsequent to the usual response of informing the parents and the store, one of the administrators took the culprits to the pharmacy, where, in addition to providing some voluntary stock room cleaning, they undertook a study of the nature, extent, and cost of shoplifting for the store and its employees.

The sense of school identity, of a school community, was remarkably strong and thoughtfully constructed at this school. Town Hall, a monthly meeting in the school gymnasium of school and community members, was an example of identity building. Based on New England town meetings, Town Hall was intended as an experiment in local democracy, and functioned as an opportunity for students, staff, and community to raise issues of public concern and also for individuals, groups of students, teachers, or parents to celebrate current projects or to stage performances. At one Town Hall, for example, a grade one student addressed the assembly on the issue of sharing access to playground equipment. Not everyone, he pointed out, had equal access to swings; sometimes the smaller children particularly could wait all recess without ever getting an opportunity to swing. After a somewhat tangential discussion, the children agreed to set a time limit on use of playground equipment when there was a queue. It was a striking example of students participating in the negotiation of their own school community.

We offer these few examples in order to demonstrate two points about the curriculum of life as critical practice and about a critical perspective on student engagement. The first is that within a critical conception of curriculum, the role of the teacher in provoking critical re-thinking of student experiences is quite different from the student-centred conception of the role of the teacher in connecting curriculum to student experiences. In the latter, student experience may remain uninterrogated unless students themselves choose to challenge it. A critical curriculum explicitly raises and deals with political issues including the question "in whose interests is this account of things?" Such a curriculum introduces the impolite (in the sense of uncomfortable) into public discourse, so that within a critical pedagogy, "respect" means more than listening to others and responding politely. It comes to mean dealing with difficult and sensitive issues openly and compassionately.

Secondly, while both a student-centred pedagogy and a critical pedagogy may be said to locate student engagement in connecting curriculum to students' lives and experiences, the different purposes for doing so amount to a profound difference in terms of conceptions of engagement and, ultimately, of educational aims. While a student-centred pedagogy imagines engagement as a consequence of students' discovery of individual interests and good work habits, a critical pedagogy envisions engagement (and, implicitly, education) as in the service of a re-thinking of experience in the interests of a more just and democratic community.

CONCLUSION

The national study of student engagement upon which the arguments in this paper are based raised for us a number of issues about notions of engagement as they appear both in the literature and in practice. One of the conclusions to which the study came was that "student engagement" itself might well be a misnomer, suggesting that engagement is somehow located in students, when in fact analyses of the data we collected argued that students, like teachers and community members, are engaged in schools when schools are engaging places to be (Smith et al, 1998). This analysis argues against a reified notion of student engagement as a phenomenon dislocated from time, place, and intention and "reproduceable" through the introduction of various programs and packages meant to engage students regardless of contexts or ideologies.

Much of the literature on student engagement, like many current educational programs intended to provide panacea for a complex variety of educational "problems," appears to us only to add to the confusion by failing to identify and claim its ideological and theoretical assumptions.

In the process of the national study, miscommunications and tensions were often grounded in educators' differing theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of student engagement, assumptions which were themselves grounded in a named or unnamed philosophy and politics of education. Conceptions of engagement, it was clear to us, were never theoretically or politically neutral, whether or not the people espousing them explicitly claimed their politics. Furthermore, as our analysis of school practices demonstrates, the claim to political and theoretical neutrality on such issues is in itself a politically conservative, techno-rational position on engagement and education.

This paper not only analyzes the ways in which various conceptions of engagement were worked out in practice within some schools in our study, but further, argues for a conception of engagement informed by a critical pedagogy. The images we have presented of students and educators in various schools, all of whom would say they were engaged in learning and

school life, suggest that, while there are similarities among the concepts, there are much greater differences. While each concept of student engagement involves making connections between the teacher, curriculum, and pedagogy, there are significant differences among the three concepts in the extent to which the curriculum is located in the lived experiences of the children and their socio-economic and cultural communities.

Thus, we would argue that student engagement in learning and school life is more productively imagined as a continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches to those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic worldview. We would suggest that not only is this a descriptive continuum, but that a move from the rational, through the interpretivist, to a more critical understanding, also approaches a more socially grounded construction of "engagement."

We would support this contention by revisiting the criteria proposed earlier as fundamentally important benchmarks of social justice – education that is just, democratic, empathetic, and optimistic. It may well be possible to claim that there are aspects of democratic participation in some rational and technical approaches in that all students generally participate in similar activities, and no-one is excluded. The rules of classroom behaviour may be carefully followed and children encouraged to clean up, to talk politely, and to walk tall, in straight double lines to and from the classroom. In other words, there may be a clear attempt on the part of the teacher to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities, the same approach to discipline, and a uniform and engaging experience. Moreover, when the teacher is concerned about creating a safe environment, building positive relationships with students, and focusing clearly on activities that have the potential to build self-esteem, the criterion of empathy is likely fulfilled as well.

Constructivist approaches not only fulfil the same two criteria of democracy and empathy, but they may enhance each of them by providing students with additional opportunities, within clearly and carefully prescribed boundaries, to make choices and to create meaning for themselves around carefully selected topics of interest.

Yet it is not until we move to a pedagogically "critical" classroom, that we find an explicit emphasis on democratic practice and justice. Raising issues from the socio-political contexts of the children's lives and of schooling from within these contexts helps children, even those who are quite young, to begin to understand not only that there are inequities in the status quo, but perhaps more importantly, to reflect on how such inequities come to be and on ways we might address and redress them. Helping students examine the fiscal costs of shop-lifting, for example, also promoted a better understanding of its social origins and costs within their own immediate and local world.

The experience of working on a national study of student engagement demonstrated that, indeed, ideology does matter, and, further, that educational rhetoric is irreducibly ideological and political, perhaps never more so than when it pretends neutrality. Student engagement, like school improvement and school effectiveness, is a catch-phrase that begs a number of qualifying questions, questions such as engagement in what and for what purposes? Our own commitments to a critical practice and pedagogy entail a set of particular responses to those questions, responses not shared by educators whose commitments lie elsewhere; as we have attempted to demonstrate in this paper, these differences have made all the difference. This paper tries to illustrate, in other words, that there is no single policy nor practice nor technique that can somehow escape the ideological, so that we might justifiably speak of "student engagement" (or school improvement, or classroom management, or anti-bullying practices, and so on) in the abstract and absolute. In these days of the quick-fix package or program designed to address educational "problems" that are often located in complex social conditions and changes, unnamed and unclaimed ideology matters profoundly.

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