

Engagement with Learning – Being Fully Present rather than Chronically Absent

Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves

Absence and Presence

Until very recently, one of the most boring topics in education was attendance. Principals might have handed out certificates for attendance to kids who weren't achieving much else. Systems and schools could use attendance figures as an easy metric to determine improvement or decline. But, along with homework and school bus schedules, attendance piqued nobody's interest. We assumed attendance was always there. Until, of course, it wasn't!

Everyone is talking about attendance now (Klan et. al. 2024). In the Canadian Province of New Brunswick where Andy is a Ministerial adviser, for example, attendance is Number 1 among 11 strategic priorities. Attendance is in the forefront of policy making, not just in Australia, but across the globe.

Why? Just, look at the numbers. In Australia in 2023, the percentage of students with above 90% attendance was still only at 61.6% in the wake of COVID-19, having risen from barely half (49.9%) in 2022 (ACARA 2023). "Record numbers" of UK pupils are "severely absent": a 150% increase since COVID-19 (Adams, 2024). Meanwhile, there has been an explosion of US students avoiding school (Mervosh & Paris, 2024), with low-income students suffering especially high rates of absenteeism, and students from wealthier families registering some of the greatest increases in absenteeism since COVID.

But read through the press and policy announcements of most countries, and when it comes to solutions, governments have got it all wrong. Mainly, they are adopting two responses: new, more rigorous expectations for attendance, with consequences for those who don't comply, and interventions and supports for families.

Who is the problem here? Pupils and their families are easy targets—too easy, in fact. Scapegoating them deflects attention from the deeper issue. Governments and schools are not looking in the mirror to see what they might be doing to contribute to this crisis. Like flawed physicians, they seem unable to heal themselves.

What is it that schools, their teachers, and the curriculum are doing that is contributing to chronic absenteeism? Even before the pandemic, the Australian Council for Educational Research (Tomson, 2018) wrote that Australian students, on average, reported "a poorer sense of belonging at school" compared to other nations participating in the international PISA survey of the OECD. In fact, ever since the OECD first collected data in 2000 (2003), students' sense of belonging has been declining (Schleicher, 2023). Serious disengagement from learning predates the pandemic by many years.

In the interests of full disclosure, it's important to declare

that, for a time, Andy was a chronic absentee from high school during his mid-teens. A clear indicator of this was when the local truancy officer showed up at his house: a family intervention, no less. The most obvious reasons for the absenteeism were not hard to see. Andy's Dad died when he was 12, and after struggling on with three working class jobs for a couple of years, his Mum collapsed, physically and mentally – stopping eating, not getting out of bed, and being afraid to leave the house – and the family went on welfare. It fell to Andy to take care of many household affairs until his grandmother could arrive late in the morning. He would show up for school late, having been registered as officially absent. In a few months his grades plummeted, and he fell from being near the top of his class to coming close to the bottom.

The sad truth was that, aside from enforcement by the truancy officer, there was little about the school to draw him back in. Most of the teaching was dull and the curriculum had little to do with his everyday life. Andy's family responsibilities were pushing him away from school, but, in truth, if he could squeeze a bit more time dealing with things at home where he could be useful, it was more than what his school could offer.

Today people of all ages are questioning whether they need to be at work all the time, or attend their university classes in person, or even go to school. Why bother, they are wondering? It's a question that schools must take seriously.

The opposite of absence is presence. It's the most basic feature of pupil engagement. And it involves so much more than mere attendance. Being completely, rather than just minimally present "means being fully engaged and aware of your environment, body, and mind in the here and now" (Mosonic, 2023, para 3). It's about being present in mind and spirit, and not in body alone. This is the essence and the necessity of pupil engagement.

Our research into educational change networks in Canada and the US shows that most teachers already know how to get young people engaged with their learning. We can't do that, however, without first being clear about just what is blocking their efforts and desires to increase engagement. The obstacles are far bigger than just the pandemic. They have to do with some of the longstanding ways that we've designed schooling. And they don't just start in secondary school, where the problems of attendance are most obvious and severe. The obstacles to or enemies of pupil engagement begin to emerge even in primary school, in the earliest years of education. And that is the place to cut them down early before they get out of control and obscure the way ahead.

Studying and Supporting Pupil Engagement

We first got involved with pupil engagement some years ago when we collaborated with educators in five US states in the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) network (CCN 2023). The purpose of the network was to narrow achievement gaps for disadvantaged pupils in rural communities by increasing their engagement with learning (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). Our job was to observe and understand their efforts, and to use our expertise to help participating schools deepen their understanding of engagement.

With them, we learned that increasing pupil engagement and, for that matter, teacher engagement, is not just a matter of dreaming up fancy new lessons, projects, or activities for children to do. Any teacher worth their salt already knows how to get kids engaged. But policies and other priorities get in the way of teachers' efforts and intentions. We need to address these things head on. We have called them *the five enemies of engagement*.

More recently, Andy's team at the University of Ottawa, co-directed with Trista Hollweck, has taken everything we learned from the US project to build a LEGO Foundation funded network of over 40 innovative schools across Canada. This collaboration aims to tackle these enemies and promote engagement and wellbeing for vulnerable and minoritized pupils after COVID-19. Taken together, these two North American networks have deepened our understanding of the nature and power of these enemies of pupil engagement and provided practical examples of ways to defeat them.

Five Enemies of Children's Engagement

Disengagement typically shows up in five ways, sometimes separately, but often in combination.

- **Disenchantment**, with school that replaces the magic of learning in the early years, with dreary routines afterwards.
- **Disconnection**, from curriculum content and school culture that fails to include and respond to students' identities.
- **Disassociation**, from feelings of belonging to a school and the communities within and beyond it.
- **Disempowerment**, where children have no voice or choice in an environment where teachers seem to make all the decisions and feel they must be in charge and in control, all the time.
- **Distraction**, where children find it hard to focus on their learning because their attention is easily turned away by other objects and activities that provide instant gratification and short-term rewards.

Like weeds that choke the growth of other, environmentally beneficial plants, these five enemies cannot be removed by minor acts of pruning. They must be scythed down so that something that is healthier, and more nurturing can flourish, creating a pathway through a secret and magical garden of inspiring curriculum experience. When those weeds are cleared away, each enemy reveals a corresponding route to pupil engagement.

Five Paths to Pupil Engagement

1. *Magic and Wonder*

One of the joys of working with young children is noticing how everything is of interest to them: from pebbles on a pavement to a line of ants advancing towards a crumb. But more and more these days, ill-advised policies have stolen the magic from children. High stakes, standardized tests like NAPLAN drive teachers into test preparation activities even before the years when the tests start so teachers don't lower their school's results. Children start learning tested vocabulary words as early as kindergarten or Year 1. Testing becomes the archenemy of engagement.

So how do we get the magic back? Australia could reconfigure the NAPLAN testing system (Wilson, et. al., 2021) so that it is based on samples rather than on testing entire cohorts of kids. This well-trying and reliable method gives everyone feedback on the system while making it almost impossible and completely unnecessary to narrow the curriculum or teach to the test.

Even when tests persist in their present form, teachers can still protect slots of curriculum time for more magical and wondrous activities. In our NWRISE project, we saw this in a lesson of children learning marimba music that was so inspiring that they shouted out spontaneously, "We love you, miss!" and "You're our second mother!" On the same school corridor, we also witnessed a teacher injecting magic into the teaching of square roots in mathematics by getting students to calculate angles for outdoor roofs and shelters. In the LEGO-Foundation funded project, we witnessed how teachers allocated one morning a week to offer inspiring classes based on Minecraft, building outdoor shelters, knitting, beautifying the school exterior, and literally, in one case, teaching children how to perform magic tricks.

Not everything in school can be magical, of course, but more than a trivial amount of it should be. We need to protect our children and their teachers from having too much of this magic stolen from them.

2. *Meaning and Purpose*

Very recently, one of Andy's grandchildren sat on his knee and asked, "Do you hate Math?" "Well, I hate Math", she went on. After a bit of probing, it turned out that what she really hated was long division. Then Andy shared a secret. "Teaching long division is stupid", he said. We need to know how to divide, and we need to know that long division exists, but there's little value in learning to do something that algorithms can perform and that no-one else needs to do for themselves, on paper – except for the tiny number who go on to be mathematics specialists.

What's the point of long division? Do we ever make a convincing case for that with our kids? Or do we just teach it because it's still there?

One of the things that creates positive emotion, the noted psychologist Martin Seligman (2018) says, is getting involved in things that have meaning and purpose. Some of the schools we have studied in Canada were teaching children at the youngest grades about how Indigenous children were separated from their parents and sent to residential boarding schools that stripped them of their language and heritage,

and inflicted great and sometimes fatal cruelties upon them. These lessons weren't fun, but children understood that they were important and that they were learning things that truly matter about their country and its people. Other teachers had their students learning about things the children had observed in their rural communities like the use of drones for building trails or for monitoring crop health in agriculture, and discussing their advantages and negative side effects, too.

The curriculum needs to contain material that isn't just there by habit or tradition or because it might lead to some distant university goal for a few specialists, but because it has meaning and purpose for children now. Teachers need to be able to convince kids about the point of what they are learning.

3. Association and Belonging

It's hard to succeed if you are led to hide or deny who you are, (Shirley, & Hargreaves, 2023) and if you are made to feel you do not belong or matter in the curriculum, your school, or your community.

A popular literacy practice in primary schools is to have a "word of the day" that children discuss and use. In one school we observed, this "word of the day" did not only always come from the dominant English language of the classroom. It sometimes drew from other languages that immigrant and refugee children were eager to share, and that dominant English language speakers wanted to know more about too.

Elsewhere, in a low-income community that suffered from years of manufacturing decline, pupils built wooden "grow towers" with their working-class skills to grow and distribute healthy food to the community. This learning valued their vocational skills and treated their working-class identity as an asset that helped them belong to their school and their community. After recent outbreaks of racism in the community, these Year 7 pupils also visited local restaurants to connect with the lives and diverse cuisines of the owners. This was needed to avoid developing the wrong kinds of belonging that exclude and oppress outsiders.

4. Empowerment and Voice

Teachers don't like seemingly random reforms to be thrown at them without having any influence or voice in their development and implementation. Children too may react negatively against topics and other curriculum content that seem to be imposed and arbitrary, even when these contents are well-meant. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Child's Rights International Network, 2018) asserts the fundamental human right of all children to be heard. The importance of the right to be heard is evident when it is manifested in action.

One US teacher who was teaching pupils about the suffragette movement in Britain learned that her high school students felt they should be able to protest parts of their schooling too, just as early feminists had spoken out in favour of women's right to vote over 100 years ago. This led to a lively discussion in which students had a chance to identify ways that they felt disempowered and how they could flip all that in a better direction. "We should

craft our purpose together," the teacher told her students, so that they would know that they "could have agency with regard to their own life's time."

One factor getting in the way of student voice, though, is the resurgence of interest in what is called the science of reading or explicit teaching in literacy (NSW Department of Education). While neuroscience and blind control studies can help us discern the difference between effective practices that get better results compared to popular alternatives that don't, the case for these initiatives can be and often is overstated. If these new programmes are too much tied to top-down control, quick test score gains, and systemwide commitments to measurable improvement, then pupils will have less voice, everyone's engagement will ultimately go down, and so will pupil achievement.

This is what eventually happened in the early 2000s in the US, UK, parts of Canada and elsewhere (Hargreaves, 2020). Short term gains were followed by a longer-term plateau in achievement results. These trends were accompanied by negative side effects in pupil motivation and teacher retention.

5. Mastery and Focus

The pursuit of greater equity in education over the past decade or so has sometimes pushed excellence into the background. Excellence has gone a bit out of fashion. People often associate it with exclusion and privilege. But excelling at something needn't mean outperforming others. A delicious meal, a grand architectural design, or a perfect speech are examples of excellence everyone can appreciate.

These kinds of excellence require hard work, persistence, sacrifice and sometimes even a bit of suffering in the pursuit of truly high standards. This is what we mean by mastery of a skill in sport or music, of learning and delivering one's lines for a play, or of perfecting every single sentence in a piece of writing, for example. Mastery means more than proficiency. It requires command not just of a thing like a body of knowledge, but also of oneself in terms of quality, self-discipline, effort, and focus on the job at hand.

These days, many things distract and divert us from this sense of focus and relentless pursuit of excellence in an age of "continuous partial attention" (Stone, 2009) when the glittering screen of a cell phone or other digital device is always within reach. Yet it's not enough just to ban the use of cell phones in schools, as more and more countries are doing, if nothing changes in what and how pupils are learning. There needs to be something truly compelling that rivets students' attention regarding true mastery in learning, that draws them away from the instant attractions of digital devices.

For example, more and more educators are drawing upon Indigenous knowledge systems and psychological research to get kids out of their seats and into learning in nature. The "forest school" movement that originated in Denmark after World War II has since spread to the United Kingdom and Canada. Educators in forest schools provide lessons and activities, some of which are customized for early childhood classrooms, (Forest Kindergartens, ND) that help teachers to draw on their natural environments to engage their children

across disciplines. In the LEGO-Foundation funded project, (Canadian Playful Schools Network, ND), given a choice to prioritize innovations that were green, screen, or machine-based in nature, most educators felt that young people had spent far too much time on screens during COVID and had great difficulty focusing on learning for any sustained period as a result. So, these educators overwhelmingly opted for green and machine-driven innovations, rather than ones that mainly took place on screens instead.

Digital learning was only adopted when it supported other learning priorities, not as a substitute for them. For example, an Indigenous student used his cell phone to document his first deer kill that involved dressing and skinning the deer, then aging and cooking the meat. Another class used digital film editing techniques along with traditional acting skills to present its own film festival to the local community. A third project involved tiny ozobots, dressed up in costumes, being programmed to move across a tableau the pupils built, in which the robotized characters performed a narrative the pupils had written.

Mastery and focus are not about going back to old-school, analogue methods only. They shouldn't mean completely abandoning digital technologies. They are about disciplined learning, with and without technology, to produce something together that is of the highest possible quality.

Conclusion

These five paths of student engagement — magic, purpose, belonging, empowerment, and mastery — require us to chop away the strangulating weeds in schools and society that are obstructing our way forward. We must change our assessment systems and find ways to work around the worst of them, wherever they persist. We must prune the curriculum of contents that no longer have any purpose or value and that clutter up our opportunities to engage our pupils effectively. We must create inclusive environments where nobody feels like they need to hide who they are, and where everyone can feel like they belong together in relation to something that is bigger than themselves. We must ensure that excess enthusiasm for and overconfidence about evidence-based pedagogies do not crowd out the voices and choices of teachers and pupils in relation to learning that is inspiring and that makes sense to them in their different communities. And we must ditch the digital distractions of on-screen entertainment and instant imagery in favour of more sustained learning where screen-based activities act as supports for other kinds of learning, not as substitutes for these engaging experiences.

The metaphor of a path and of the weeds that grow across it, tangle it up and hide it away from us, is one we have chosen intentionally. It is intended to convey a sense of an adventure in which the challenges, delights and surprises of learning and success can be just around the corner for everyone. In the battle for young people's attention, mere attendance is not enough. The active presence of everyone in a fully engaged and inclusive learning environment that has had all the weeds cleared away from it is what we need instead. Isn't that just what our young people truly need and deserve?

References

- Adams, R. (2024, March 22). Record numbers of pupil absences in England, DfE figures show. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/mar/21/record-numbers-of-pupil-absences-in-england-dfe-figures-show>
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). (2023). *National report on schooling in Australia*. <http://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/student-attendance>
- Canadian Playful Schools Network. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://playjouer.ca/>
- Child's Rights International Network. (2018). Article 12: *The child's opinion*. <https://archive.crin.org/en/home/rights/convention/articles/article-12-childs-opinion.html>
- Comprehensive Center Network. (2023). *The Northwest Rise Network*. <https://reg17cc.educationnorthwest.org/nw-rise>
- Forest Kindergartens. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://lftl.org.uk/forest-kindergarten/>
- Hargreaves, A. (2020). Large-scale assessments and their effects: The case of mid-stakes tests in Ontario. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21, 393–420.
- Klan, A., Whitley, J., Krause, A., McBrearty, N., Rogers, M. A., & Smith, J. D. (2024). An exploration of school attendance problems experienced by children receiving mental health services. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 41(1), 73-92.
- Learning Network. (2024). Why school absences have 'exploded' almost everywhere. *New York Times*.
- Mosonic, C. (2023, October 25). How to be more present and live in the moment. *Calm Blog*. <https://www.calm.com/blog/how-to-be-more-present>
- NSW Department of Education. (n.d.). Literacy and numeracy. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/literacy-and-numeracy/resources-for-schools/what-works-best/what-works-best-reading-k-6/explicit-teaching#:~:text=Literacy%20and%20numeracy&text=Explicit%20teaching%20practices%20involve%20teachers,students%20discover%20that%20information%20themselves>
- OECD. (2003, October 14). *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation: Results from PISA 2000*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264018938-en>
- Schleicher, A. (2023). *PISA 2022 insights and interpretations*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA%202022%20Insights%20and%20Interpretations.pdf>
- Seligman, M. (2018). PERMA and the building blocks of well-being. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 30(4). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2018.1437466>
- Shirley, D., & Hargreaves, A. (2021). *Five paths of student engagement: Blazing the trail to learning and success*. Solution Tree Press.
- Shirley, D., & Hargreaves, A. (2023). *The age of identity: Who do our kids think they are... and how do we help them belong?* Corwin.
- Stone, L. (2009, November 30). Beyond simple multi-tasking: Continuous partial attention. <https://lindastone.net/2009/11/30/beyond-simple-multi-tasking-continuous-partial-attention/>
- Thomson, S. (2018, June 6). Many Australian students feel they 'don't belong' in school: New research. *Australian Council of Educational Research*. <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/australian-students-feel-they-dont-belong-research>
- Wilson, R., Piccoli, A., Hargreaves, A., Ng, P., & Sahlberg, P. (2021). *Putting students first: Moving on from NAPLAN to a new educational assessment system*. Gonski Institute for Education.



Dennis Shirley & Andy Hargreaves are Research Professors at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College in the US. Their most recent book, *The Age of Identity: Who do our kids think they are and how do we help them belong*, is published by Corwin Press.

Copyright of Practical Literacy: The Early & Primary Years is the property of Australian Literacy Educators' Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.