Toward meaningful engagement:
Trauma-informed positive education strategies for struggling students

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Abstract

When seeking to increase school engagement with middle school students who struggle with behavioural and learning difficulties, a school's teachers must consider engagement factors both external and internal to the classroom. It is important to acknowledge the systemic and intergenerational reasons why some students and their families struggle to engage meaningfully with education. However, this article narrows focus on what teachers can do within the walls of their own classroom to increase engagement through two pathways: (1) designing curriculum and providing feedback to optimise flow conditions and (2) revisioning their own classroom as an effective therapeutic milieu wherein the classroom itself is positioned as the most viable and consistent place to support the unmet learning needs of students. Drawing on paradigms of both positive education and trauma-informed education, first, this article will introduce our adaptation of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) as a set of useful strategies for student engagement within curriculum design and delivery. Then, we will introduce trauma-informed strategies arising from our own research and practice to create the conditions for engagement in the service of effective student learning and everyday accomplishment.

The Need for New Perspectives on Student Engagement

Middle school years are a time of learning, growth and potential disruption for all students. From biological and neurological perspectives, middle school students experience a critical period of growth in their brain and physical development (Arain et al., 2013); they experience increasing threats to mental health (Soneson et al., 2020); and they find themselves at an important juncture when forging viable education pathways for themselves (Hill & Wang, 2015).

Researchers and practitioners have long sought to increase middle school engagement with learning. Skinner and Belmont (1993) suggest a classic definition of classroom engagement which includes both behavioural and emotional components wherein engaged students show sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities with positive emotional tone. Specific to vulnerable learners, relevant practice approaches have sought to increase middle student engagement including hands-on project-based enquiry learning (DeMink-Carthew & Olofson, 2020), increasing emotional bonds between student and teacher (Roorda et al, 2011), instilling intercultural understanding (Gimpel, 2015) and taking an interdisciplinary approach to middle years curriculum design (Harrison, Hurd, & Brinegar, 2020).

The opposite of engagement is disaffection wherein students are passive, show decreasing effort, and give up on tasks that they are capable of finishing (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Disaffected students either realise that their inherent strengths are not applicable to learning or not worthy of leveraging for future educational goals (Brunzell & Abbott, 2015; Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Norrish, 2015). Learning requires each student to manage

their moment-by-moment escalation and uncertainty; and we know that disaffected students within our own practice are quick to give up.

However, this is only what can be seen on the surface—as in, what we can visibly observe within the classroom. Below the surface, we know that students are often struggling to meet their own basic needs (Deering, 2013; Maslow, 1943/1971), learning tasks are not accessible to their current independent learning levels (Witter, 2013), they do not feel safe in the classroom to take healthy learning risks (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016), and they struggle to manage their own escalated stress responses when encountering speedbumps or listening to feedback (Stokes et al., 2019).

There are many helpful ways to consider the contributing factors that impact successful engagement. We can parse engagement into external factors and internal factors both outside and inside the classroom. It is useful for teachers to consider that many external engagement factors occurring outside the classroom are beyond their daily control. For instance, teachers may have little impact over students' diet (Haidar et al., 2019), sleep habits (Fonseca & Genzel, 2020), and weekly home routines (Smith et al., 2019) all of which have been shown to positively impact a student's ability to learn.

Taking an even bigger perspective through systems-aware approaches (see for example Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kern et al., 2019), we know there are many systemic factors that negatively impact students' ability to successfully engage with education. Students we are most concerned about struggle due to intergenerational poverty and adversity (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016); the compounding systemic and longstanding impacts of generational trauma and racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995); and ongoing negative effects of COVID-19 (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020).

While teachers must be aware of these systemic engagement factors, we argue that teachers be encouraged to understand (and collectively work towards addressing) these

factors *while simultaneously* prioritising what they can control within their classroom to increase student engagement. We propose here specific strategies that teachers can do to build upon systems-informed responses.

Our praxis is guided by Hattie's (2012) findings that having high expectations for student engagement means creating classroom environments which help students set high expectations for themselves. Within a classroom environment based on engagement principles, students should have the opportunity to accurately assess their current capacities within a task, set their own goals, assess their own goals, then set new goals—thereby increasing expectations for their own future potentials.

Students in Flow for Maximum Engagement

For the last 20 years, a useful turn in the exploration of engagement and the conditions which facilitate states of engagement have been situated within the paradigm of positive psychology, the scientific pursuit to understand and enable the conditions of flourishing for individuals, communities, and societies (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and the implementation of positive psychology interventions in the classroom known as positive education (Kern et al., 2015; Norrish, 2015; Norrish et al., 2013; Waters, 2011). Within these paradigms, Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2002) define engagement as sustained concentration, interest and enjoyment. When these conditions are met, the individual can settle deep into task absorption and sustained attention. In short, they want to keep going, keep practicing, tackle the next sentence or the next problem—and when they check the clock, it feels like time has disappeared.

We urge teachers to create the conditions of flow in their classrooms. Csikszentmihalyi (1990/2020) defines flow as the state of effortless action wherein the individual becomes so involved with the task or the activity that they lose track of time,

nothing else seems to matter while they are doing the task, and the activity is justified for the sake of doing it. Flow theory is our blueprint to help teachers design their curriculum and practice for optimal classroom engagement (Brunzell, Norrish, et al., 2015). As flow is a mental state of focused attention and allows for deep task absorption, this occurs in a highly engaged classroom.

We have adapted Csikszentmihalyi's (1990/2020) findings of flow conditions as a checklist for teachers to facilitate student engagement when learning. What follows is an explanation of each step on our flow checklist (see Figure 1). Since most teachers educate groups of students together (as opposed to sustained one-to-one work), we offer the following strategies that can be planned for the group with the individual in mind.

(insert Figure 1)

Step One: Teacher diagnoses student skill level to design the task

The first step in developing student achievement under flow conditions is to design learning tasks within a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978, p. 89) defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Engaged classrooms are ones wherein teachers are consistently designing learning opportunities for students with high success rates (Brophy & Good, 1986).

The opposite is sadly true: when the task is not within the student's ZPD, students give up because they cannot achieve success. Shernoff and colleagues (2003) conclude that when students found that their own skills met the task, their engagement increased. Working within a student's ZPD affords a teacher such opportunities to ensure that the task is pitched on the right level.

In our practice supporting schools, we observe more primary teachers regularly assessing their students' ZPD than middle school teachers. In primary school, teachers often spend more hours with fewer students and thus have frequent opportunities for summative assessments. Given less time per student, middle school teachers need to be more strategic with their planning to be sure to incorporate assessments prior to designing the learning task. Without an accurate assessment, teachers can become trapped in their own assumptions about what a young person can or cannot do. Particularly relevant for the students we support, teachers have incorrect expectations for students from underrepresented minority groups and/or lower socioeconomic status (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006). Such biased expectations lead to negative consequences for young people as they grow older (Walkey et al., 2013). Implementing ongoing diagnostics allow for teachers to eliminate the risk of negatively biased expectations because the results from the diagnostics set the student's task, not the teacher's assumptions.

For a practical example in English class, prior to launching a writing recount task, a teacher can first ask students to write a recount based on a recent excursion as a formative assessment. Then, comparing their recounts with curriculum standards, the teacher should determine what each student can already do and what they cannot do yet before designing the task. Equipped with the diagnostic results, the teacher can set the task. When tasks are designed to be open-ended and differentiated to the needs of each learner, the entire classroom of learners can succeed within their own levels to ensure flow conditions—and still remain as a classroom community working together to support one another. Such open-ended tasks allow for students to maximise their time on task (Brophy & Good, 1986) and allow development of surface and deep knowledge (Hattie, 2012).

Open-ended tasks allow for students at different abilities to be successful because these tasks are set within students' developmental continuums and allow for students to

develop their stamina for learning while immersing themselves in deep thinking. To elaborate our practical example, the writing teacher, after analysing the data from the beginning of unit recount diagnostic, can then differentiate the learning task based on what students demonstrated they can do and what they need to learn next. This might mean that one student provides a two-paragraph recount about a topic within their schema (i.e., a recount of their previous weekend), whilst another student recounts an abstract concept (i.e., recounting a cultural belief or practice).

Step Two: Develop clear success criteria so that the task has well-defined learning aims

People are in flow where there are clear goals (Csikszentmihalyi; 1990/2020). When learning is clearly signposted for students, they will be more likely to engage with the challenge. Tasks that have learning aims as goals, accompanied with success criteria, help create the conditions for students to have focus for longer periods of time, have more motivation in their learning and take increased responsibility for their learning (Beesley et al., 2018). Learning aims should be taken from the standards; and success criteria show whether and how well students have met learning aims inherent in the standards. When teachers communicate clear success criteria (i.e., discussing and writing success criteria on the board every day) that show what the teacher is looking for in their students' work, students also develop the skill of managing themselves. This self-management is critical in enhancing stamina for learning and creating flow conditions (Witter, 2013).

Within an open-ended task given to the entire class, the task can be designed to vary from student to student, however the success criteria should be the same. For example, when a writing teacher is developing students' ability to write a recount, the daily success criteria should be aligned to the end-of-unit rubric detailing exactly what the recount should demonstrate to meet expectations (see Table 1 for an example).

Table 1. Examples of learning aims and success criteria

Today's Aim: **Write a captivating introductory sentence for your recount**	
Success Criteria 1:	*The introductory sentence is interesting and memorable.*
Success Criteria 2:	*The introductory sentence's tone is appropriate to the audience.*
Success Criteria 3:	*The introductory sentence relates to the recount's main idea or purpose.*
Success Criteria 4:	*The introductory sentence does not feel out of place in the first paragraph.*

The writing teacher can then explicitly teach success criteria for the aim, spending time comparing examples of criteria at its best and deconstructing how to improve examples below standard. Together, students then critically analyse the difference between the examples of each criteria prior to applying the learning to their own writing. The continuum of criteria has impact when students continuously refer back to it as they complete the task. We suggest that middle school teachers make daily routines of (1) publicly writing the learning aims and success criteria so students regularly check back during the task; (2) linking success criteria to 'good/better/exemplar' examples of what they can achieve; and (3) regularly prompting students to reflect back to the success criteria both individually and as a whole-class routine.

Step Three: Give students immediate feedback

Feedback to students focuses on helping them improve and maintains their engagement in the learning process. In our practice supporting vulnerable learners in middle schools, we find that teachers do not provide enough regular and ongoing feedback to ensure

students are in flow. Feedback helps build the bridge between what a student can do now and what they are learning next (Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Teachers should use the success criteria as an anchor for what we are calling *fix-it feedback*: feedback that helps fill the gap between what is understood and what needs to be understood next.

We encourage teachers to specifically use the moniker *fix-it feedback* because it takes the heat out of formal assessment particularly for students who escalate when given what they perceive to be 'correction'. Feedback is most helpful when it alters the gap of knowledge (Sadler, 1989), and we aim to nurture the value that no work is 'perfect'. When giving feedback, consider student's willingness. Start with what the student did well, ensure that the feedback is aligned to the success criteria, and provide strategies to ensure the student feels they can apply your fix-it feedback with appropriate scaffolds.

We know that middle school teachers are often given the ambitious task of providing feedback to many students. However, we know that the students who struggle the most require regular and sometimes continuous feedback (in the short term) to maintain their engagement and settle into the flow of learning. Feedback does not have to come from the teacher alone. To optimise flow conditions, the daily rhythm of the class should regularly incorporate using and reflecting on the success criteria during independent practice.

If teachers use effective feedback based on clear success criteria, self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies can be an effective and efficient tool for boosting student engagement. Developing opportunities for self- and peer-assessment using the success criteria will support students' own self-monitoring of progress. We recommend the following three strategies to make fix-it feedback sustainable when teaching multiple middle school classes: (1) set up a routine to rotate specific groups of students' fix it feedback throughout

the week; (2) develop routines for peer feedback; (3) incorporate more opportunities for self-assessment.

Practically, the writing teacher might focus on one criterion within the rubric when setting up feedback opportunities during the draft phase of the recount, such as effective introductory sentences (see Table 1). After drafting, students can then compare their work with an exemplar examples, self-assess, and then revise accordingly. At the lesson's conclusion, students can exchange their work with a peer for more fix-it feedback and revise again.

These feedback routines are not only sustainable for a teacher, who can provide individual feedback to students who require immediate attention, but also affords more opportunities for students to connect with the success criteria with their peers. When teachers proactively set up the conditions for optimal flow through the curriculum development process of assessment, setting tasks within ZPDs, and providing ongoing feedback that is aligned to the task's success criteria, students will develop enhanced task focus and begin to set higher expectations for what they can accomplish each day.

The Next Step: Enhancing the Classroom Environment as an Engagement Strategy

To build on the curricular engagement strategies adapted from flow theory with vulnerable learners in mind, we next turn to strategies to create a healthy classroom environment for student engagement by designing their classroom as a trauma-informed *therapeutic milieu*. An imperative distinction to be made is that teachers are not therapists nor mental health clinicians and therefore, should never replace the important interpersonal work of our allied education professionals. However, Stokes and colleagues (2019) found when researching our practice that student engagement increased when teachers designed the

environment of their classroom when employing trauma-informed therapeutic principles. Considering the classroom as a trauma-informed therapeutic milieu repositions the classroom as dual-purpose: (1) a place to instil the skills and strategies to become a life-long learner and (2) an environment which is itself an intervention to help someone meet their own needs in healthy ways.

We find Street's (2018) model for *contextual wellbeing* within schools quite useful to help in the articulation of a healthy classroom environment. We have used Street's model to organise our trauma-informed strategies so that teachers can identity and enact strategies to ensure their classroom is an environment of engagement for all students—with focus on their struggling students. The domains of contextual wellbeing include people, physical spaces, policy, practice and social norms.

Trauma-informed Engagement Practices for *People*

The people in the school are continuously in relationships—some that often help learning and unfortunately, some that can hinder learning. Trauma-informed practices focus on building relationships with students who have struggled to make and sustain relationships due to their own histories of disrupted attachments (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). Students who have experienced healthy relationships can often be swiftly co-regulated by a teacher or peer to have strategies to de-escalate themselves when experiencing stress when learning within the classroom.

For students who struggle in interpersonal relationships, attempts to be co-regulated by another can unfortunately have the opposite outcome. Students who interpret healthy relational interactions as threatening or dominating struggle to develop the social skills and collaborative mindset required for learning, and therefore teachers must be proactively ready to create relationally safe environments to support students when they feel like giving up, reject fix-it feedback, push the work away, and disengage from the classroom community.

For teachers to have relationships that are strong enough to invite students to activate a de-escalating self-regulation strategy, successfully complete diagnostic assessments, determine their own academic goals, and receive fix-it feedback, teachers have to have specific strategies to create and maintain a classroom culture of safety and respect for students with complex needs. We draw on the following concepts which can help teachers create and build upon relationships for learning:

Attachment.   Attachment (Bowlby, 1971; Cornelius White, 2007) is a theory which helps us understand that healthy relationships are based upon co-regulatory principles. We regulate our own physical rhythms (i.e., heartrate, responses to stress, healthy coping) when we are in the presence of another regulated person (Kohler et al., 2002). For teachers new to this theory, it can be confronting if teachers feel they need to be the definitive voice of power and control within the classroom—and not understand it is inherent within their role to co-regulate others to maintain focus on healthy relationships and learning.

Through the lens of attachment theory, we can see when teachers raise exasperated voices ("*Sit down! I'm going to write your name on the board now!*"), they are creating a no-win situation for a student who has just been embarrassed in front of their peers. Teachers enacting dominator behaviours are not modelling healthy responses to stress nor healthy coping at times of disruption. We can model adulthood for our middle school students with attachment moves of our own (Klem & Connell, 2004). It starts by consciously not embarrassing students in front of their friends, but rather, ensuring that any corrective feedback be given in a way that the student can truly hear and understand that you want the best for them.

Teachers enact attachment strategies to address resistant behaviour when they (1) take a deep breath before giving students fix-it feedback to ensure both parties are connecting—*not reacting*—to one another; (2) crouch down next to the student, side-by-side and shoulder-

to-shoulder to avoid eye-contact or looking down at students; (3) give the fix-it feedback in a lowered tone of voice, so only the student can hear in order to preserve their self-concept in front of their peers; and (4) circle back to the student with enough time to allow them to shake off the moment and return to work (versus standing over them). We know that giving students fix-it feedback on their behaviour takes time and practice, particularly when teachers consider new ways to provide feedback that do not fall back into negative habits of dominator behaviours.

Unconditional positive regard. Within therapeutically supportive relationships, unconditional positive regard is a useful way to understand how to maintain focus on the health and wellbeing of the person—while simultaneously intervening to address their dysregulated or unhelpful behaviours (Rogers, 1961). If teachers unconsciously see their vulnerable students as problems that need to be fixed, it will be quite difficult to accurately assess the causes of negative behaviour and proactively create the environmental context for the student to achieve into their potential. A perspective of unconditional positive regard shifts teacher thinking from "*Here we go again…He's always disengaged right after the independent work begins…*" to "*There must be a pattern here, and I just don't see the causes yet. I need a second set of eyes to help me determine a better strategy to keep him engaged.*"

Teachers can aim to create the environmental context for healthy relationships by seeing it as their role to consistently model attachment and unconditional positive regard. This is not an easy task and requires our reserves of patience for students with patterns of educational disruption. However, we know that students will not engage in learning or request fix-it feedback from their teachers unless they feel safe, supported, and believe their teacher is on their side to help them manage the everyday speedbumps that arise when learning.

Trauma-informed Engagement Practices for *Physical Spaces*

We consider the physical spaces containing the classroom environment as both the seen (i.e., the walls, furniture and lighting) and the experienced (i.e., classroom routines, transition strategies from one class to another, and responses to off-task behaviours) all of which occur within the physical space of the classroom. The spaces, and inherent routines within those spaces that we inhabit, can either increase engagement or create barriers—which can quickly become unhelpful excuses for why students cannot learn.

Calming classroom spaces. We know that students who struggle have not yet felt that the classroom belongs to them. Particularly for middle school, most classrooms do not 'belong' to just one class or one teacher. Middle school teachers are often required to put forth extra effort to share learning spaces and thus, it can be difficult to tailor learning spaces for cohort- or subject-specific student needs. We recommend that teachers who share spaces work together each term to address aspects such as the lighting (i.e., do you have harsh overhead fluorescent lighting that could be mitigated by utilising natural sunlight and a combination of floor lamps, desk lamps or other options?), furniture (i.e., can you bring in a variety of seating options such as small table groups, stools, beanbags, furniture that allows students to move in place—all of which students can choose what works for them?), and areas of the classroom to call their own (i.e., can you create corners of the classroom for students to elect to work by themselves and request this option because the corners are decorated with inviting plants, posters, or work station materials?; Witter, 2013).

Students need to *move*. The research is now clear: students need to move to stay engaged with the task (Mahar, et al, 2006). To increase cognitive functioning and sustained focus for learning, a student's body cannot remain static for the entire lesson sitting and listening to information. Consider that in primary school, students are more likely to be involved in regular physical movement activities through class singing, kinaesthetic learning, and multiple physical transitions between rug-time, deskwork and learning stations; in middle

school students are often being trained for senior secondary classrooms where all too often, lectures and note taking are the norm. Middle school teachers have the opportunity to teach healthy routines and to teach students that moving when learning increases engagement levels and competence (Hruska & Clancy, 2008).

We like calling movement breaks throughout the lesson *brain breaks*. Brain breaks are short lesson interruptions that give our brains the opportunity to pause in learning and give other parts of our body opportunity to move and be active. These can be formal ("*Everyone, we are now going to take 3 deep breaths together and then play silent ball for four minutes*") or informal ("*If you want to pause your writing, and squeeze the fidget tool while you brainstorm the next sentence, go for it!*"). There are many resources that can be found by searching for brain breaks (see for example IPEGGS & BSEM, 2019). Brain brakes make it possible for students to increase their stamina for on-task learning one minute at a time. We urge teachers to teach a number of brain breaks throughout the year so students can eventually have an entire repertoire to choose from to self-regulate themselves; and eventually have an entire tool kit of self-regulatory strategies of their own by the time they reach their senior secondary years.

Trauma-informed Engagement Practices for *Policy* and *Social Norms*

While it is beyond the scope of this article to adequately address policy and social norms leading to healthy contexts for engagement, we want to introduce topics for future exploration that currently guide our own research and practice. When seeking to increase engagement with struggling students, we know that the policies and social norms must support what individual teachers are doing in their classroom to help students meet their own needs in healthy ways.

The research evaluating our work has shown that engagement increases with struggling students when there is a school-wide shift in social norms valuing trauma-informed practices (Stokes et al., 2019). These newly emerging social norms include proactive help seeking so vulnerable students can identity support before they rupture the learning environment (Was & Warneken, 2017); using 'ready to learn plans' as individualised, student-created plans for personal de-escalation and self-regulation (Brunzell, Norrish, et al., 2015); teaching towards growth mindset school culture and valuing learning from mistakes (Dweck, 2007); and instilling the social norm of fix-it feedback, wherein everyone is a lifelong learner that can be helped along the way through regular feedback (Witter, 2013).

Taking the widest view within our communities, we support families that struggle by working towards education equity including fair access to allied education supports, forging strong parent and carer ties to the school, and placing school at the centre of community as an emancipatory step towards self-determination. Our teachers must have continuous opportunities to learn new strategies to address and incorporate: cultural safety and culturally responsive pedagogies (see for example www.8ways.online and also Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995); trauma-informed practice throughout their professional journeys (Howard, 2018); strategies to address the impacts of poverty within communities (Doidge et al., 2017); and ground their behavioural intervention upon restorative practices (McCluskey et al., 2008).

Conclusion

When engaging students, particularly students who struggle to engage due to complex factors such as experiencing adverse childhood experiences, intergenerational education inequity, systemic racism and system barriers to family supports, we all have a role to play across educational and allied education systems. It can start within the walls of each

classroom by ensuring that every teacher understands the psychological state of flow and total emersion in the task. Then, by understanding that the classroom environment can itself be an intervention towards engagement, trauma-informed principles can increase engagement by providing the environmental context that holds the classroom community together.

We see the future directions of our work as a continued journey of integration between wellbeing-informed and trauma-informed practices, between the system of the classroom itself and the greater systems in which the classroom is embedded, and between the dual purposes of this work of healing and growth through learning. We urge teachers to find the access point that resonates with their own practice and then to share these stories broadly for us all to learn together.

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