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# Engagement for What? Beyond Popular Discourses of Student Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

In the last decade educational research about school improvement and effective schools increasingly identifies the significance of student engagement especially in relation to the academic success of students. There are several issues and concerns, relating both to the meaning and justification or aims of student engagement, that arise from this work that call for a philosophical inquiry. This paper offers an initial philosophical inquiry of student engagement. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section critically examines meanings and definitions of student engagement from current literature. The second section addresses several related issues, such as concerns of the purpose of student engagement, and the criteria, standards, and norms used to determine the quality and degree of engagement. It is argued that without considering such philosophical issues, empirical and psychological work on student engagement could simply, and at times unwittingly, reproduce existing dominant views that promote a deficient and exclusionary mentality. In contrast, we propose a conception of student engagement based on critical-democratic practice which entails the enactment of a curriculum of life.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade educational research about school improvement and effective schools increasingly identifies the significance of student engagement especially in relation to the academic success of students. Several studies

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identify the different formats student engagement takes in schools. Others focus on those conditions that either promote or hinder student engagement including qualities of teaching or teachers, and school culture and policies (Burke & Nierenberg, 1998; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Fawcett, 1999; Finn & Voekl, 1993; Maeroff, 1998; Newmann, 1992; Smith et al., 1998; Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995). Some of these studies have even elicited the views of students themselves (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Smith et al., 1998). But unfortunately, these studies rarely focus on student engagement from a philosophical perspective, and consequently the term has become a popular, but at times, an empty and superficial, catch-phrase or slogan. Yet there are several issues and concerns, relating both to the meaning and justification or aims of student engagement, that call for a philosophical inquiry. This paper offers an initial philosophical inquiry of student engagement.

This paper focuses on the limitations of popular discourse on student engagement, and the connection between student engagement and ‘‘critical democracy’’ (Goodman, 1992), a connection which, will be argued, provides a perspective that could overcome at least some of these limitations. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section, we examine meanings and definitions of student engagement from current literature. Most of the current work simply offers prescriptive or stipulative definitions of student engagement. We provide an analysis of these definitions to show that many of them directly or indirectly propose or assume a traditional perspective of engagement which is very often and too swiftly identified, almost exclusively, with external behaviours. Hence the primary focus is on procedural aspects that relate to engagement, that is on specific procedures, strategies, and skills that teachers ought to develop or implement in order to secure student engagement. Very little work attempts to address the issue of dispositions, values and aims associated with student engagement both from students’ and teachers’ perspectives. Consequently most of the definitions of student engagement offered as well as the majority of the empirical work conducted on student engagement fail to address substantive ethical and political issues relating to student engagement.

The second section of the paper addresses several related issues, such as concerns of the purpose of student engagement, and the criteria, standards, and norms used to determine the quality and degree of engagement. The latter issue leads to a consideration of whether or not all forms of student engagement are equally worthwhile. We will argue that without considering such philosophical issues, empirical and psychological work on student engagement could simply, and at times unwittingly, reproduce existing dominant views that promote a deficient and exclusionary mentality. In contrast, we propose a conception of student engagement based on critical-democratic practice which entails the enactment of a curriculum of life (Portelli & Vibert, 2001, 2002). Such a curriculum seriously addresses immediate students' concerns, at the personal, social and political levels. A critical-democratic conception of engagement is contrasted both with conservative and liberal perspectives of engagement that ultimately, in our view, simply reproduce the inequities of the status quo.[1] In other words, the second section attempts to offer an educational, moral and political justification for a critical perspective on student engagement.

## DEFINITIONS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Educationists offer several definitions and meanings of student engagement offered by educationists. We have identified three major kinds, which we have labeled as conservative or traditional, liberal or student-oriented, and critical-democratic. In this section we will critically discuss the first two conceptions of student engagement.

### The Conservative or Traditional Conception

We refer to the first category as the "conservative or traditional" conception since the definitions and meanings offered in this case interpret student engagement in a rather hierarchical, narrow or limited way. Student engagement is almost exclusively identified with a certain conception of academic achievement or a process identifiable by behavioral traits and/or observable psychological dispositions. Within this framework, there are attempts to offer abstract conceptualizations of engagement that are meant to apply to all settings irrespective of differences in contexts or needs. This, in turn, leads to a linear or a simple cause-effect characterization of student engagement. Moreover, the role of student involvement in the creation of meaningful engagement is not considered since the full responsibility for determining engaging curriculum is assumed or deemed to be held by the teacher. The assumption that the teacher is deemed to have full responsibility and control over the curriculum has been interpreted by some researchers (see Smith et al., 1998; Valencia, 1997) to imply a deficit mentality toward students.

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[1] A clarification about the use of the terms 'conservative,' 'liberal,' and 'critical-democratic' is in order especially since different meanings have been connected with these terms. The term 'conservative' is used to capture both Dewey's notion of "traditional education" (Dewey, 1938) and Freire's notion of "neo-liberal education" (Freire, 1998). The term 'liberal' is used to capture the kind of educational beliefs articulated by Dewey's notion of "progressivist education" (1938) and those held by certain proponents of child-centered education (for example, A.S. Neill, 1960, and John Holt, 1980), a view which in A.C. Bower's terms places "the individual as the epicenter of the universe" (1987, p. 42). The term 'critical-democratic' is used to capture the beliefs and values expressed in the work of educationists such as Dewey (1938), Freire (1998), and Greene (1984). As Goodman (1992) puts it, "critical democracy implies a significant expansion of democratic participation in the multiple realms of social life in which one takes place.... [It] also implies a moral commitment to promote 'public good' over any individual's right to accumulate privilege and power. In this sense it suggests strong values for equality and social justice. As a result, critical democracy presupposes that social arrangements will be developed within a socio-historical context" (pp. 7–8). For an elaboration of the educational and epistemological implications of these positions see Goodman (1992) and Portelli (2001).

This perspective of engagement identifies a correlation between engagement and academic achievement (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Steinberg, 1996). According to Newmann et al. (1992) engagement is directed toward the mastery of academic work. In this regard, Finn and Voelkl (1993) claim to establish "a clear relationship between student engagement and academic achievement" (p. 250).

Strong et al. (1995) focus on the process of engagement, which they formally and thinly describe but do not analyze. According to them, irrespective of purpose, engaging work "stimulates students' curiosity, permits them to express their creativity, and fosters positive relationships with others" (p. 8). They depict engagement as goal driven, fulfilling basic human needs and articulate a list of strategies teachers need to employ to motivate students to achieve these goals (Strong et al., 1995, pp. 9–10). Engagement is consequently identified with academic success with the conditions and the criteria determined solely by the teacher.

From this first perspective, engagement is conceived and determined in behavioral terms; such that "engaged students attend their classes, try reasonably hard to do well in them, complete the homework they are assigned, and don't cheat" (Steinberg, 1996, p. 67). Furthermore, Steinberg (1996) declares that "engagement must be a prerequisite to learning" (p. 66). This assumption leaves unaddressed questions as to the nature of learning or the purpose and goals of learning. This conservative perspective of engagement can very easily become a form of indoctrination because it views student engagement as "an indicator of children's commitment not only to education, but to the goals and values held by adult society" (Steinberg, 1996, p. 16). This stance seems to assume two controversial points; first that there exists a set of goals and values commonly held by all members of society, and second a belief that the purpose of education is to socialize, sort and select students consistent with a functionalist perspective (Hurn, 1993).

In addition to a behavioral component, the traditional conception of engagement includes a psychological dimension (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Steinberg, 1996; Newmann et al., 1992). What is at issue here is not the addition of this component but the way this dimension is conceived. Newmann et al. (1992) identify "engagement in academic work as the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skill, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (p. 12). They also claim that this investment in learning goes beyond merely the completion of tasks in order to achieve "grades or social approval" (p. 12). Such an understanding of engagement which focuses on what engagement *involves* rather than what it *is*, appears to equate engagement with student motivation to complete prescribed tasks. This is consistent with the notion articulated by Steinberg (1996) who proposes that "[A]t the most engaged end of the continuum are students who are interested in doing well in school because they have a strong intrinsic motivation to achieve" (p. 70). Newmann et al. (1992) contend that "engagement is a construct used to describe an inner quality of concentration and effort to learn" (p. 13). This abstract conceptualization with its emphasis on psychological investment leads one to question whether there are other types of investment involved. Consistent with their assumption that what is taught in schools is academic and therefore by extension valuable, these theoreticians do not question what is learned, the reasons for learning it, or whose meanings are being learned. According to Newmann et al. (1992), the content of engagement is established by teachers and sets the conditions to 'hook' students. In addition, by locating engagement exclusively or primarily within academics these theorists don't challenge either the notion of academics nor the given academic curriculum. This meaning does not appear to include investment in areas such as physical education or affective/social skill development. If one accepts that what is taught is academic, it would be difficult to look at curriculum from any other perspective. Such a position could lead to a view of engagement as a form of psychological imposition by way of the hidden curriculum (O'Brien, 2000).

The traditional perspective as captured in the work of Newmann et al. (1992) and Steinberg (1996), depicts engagement as linear with levels represented by “a continuum from less to more, not as a dichotomous state of being either engaged or unengaged” (p. 13). Steinberg (1996) relates a “strong sense of engagement” to success within the dominant society. He asserts that “[a]t the most engaged end of the continuum are students who are interested in doing well in school because they have a strong intrinsic motivation to achieve, because succeeding in the classroom makes them feel proud and accomplished, and because they connect success in school with success in other aspects of life” (p. 70). None of these authors discuss or even mention students who are disengaged or alienated, for whom schools have no meaning or sense of connection. Perhaps they assume that the concepts ‘disengaged’ and ‘unengaged’ are identical which may be as problematic as equating ‘immoral’ with ‘amoral.’ Conceivably being disengaged includes the notion of a disconnect or a marginalization whereas being unengaged indicates a passive, and perhaps more temporary, withdrawal. Nonetheless, without distinguishing between the concepts of disengagement and unengagement, Steinberg (1996) sees engagement as good and lack of engagement as bad, blaming the students who are not engaged for being unengaged or disengaged. Consistent with his view of the relationships among engagement, compliance, and academic success, Steinberg (1996) suggests a punitive approach as one way to address the problem of students who are not engaged, unmotivated or not achieving academically. Specifically, he contends that we need “to raise the minimum standards and expectations in schools and to have genuine and unpleasant consequences for students who fail to meet them” (p. 76).

Although we do not dispute that there are connections between engagement and academic learning, and while we agree that there are some merits to viewing engagement as a continuum, we find the traditional perspective lacking on several counts. The notion of engagement that emerges from this perspective is too limited and linear. It does not interrogate the content of what amounts to academically worthwhile, and it conceives of engagement in primarily strong behavioral terms and a narrow psychological understanding of the concept. In this sense, one could argue that this conception of engagement would lead to the exclusion of certain students from being engaged unless they happen to adhere to the ideological traits that this conception promotes as being “natural” or “acceptable to all.” In other words, this conception of engagement seems to favor or advantage those students who accept the mainstream functionalist conception of education (Giroux, 1983, p. 180, 1988, p. 23).

## The Liberal or Student Oriented Conception

The second category is referred to as the "liberal" or "student oriented" conception of engagement. This conception broadens the meaning of engagement beyond traditional notions of the academic and focuses on the strengths of students, and hence does not overtly adopt a deficit model which maintains that "the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies" (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). Although still connecting engagement with behavioural and emotional dispositions, Smith et al. (1998), for example, accept "the premise that the purpose of schooling is broader than individual academic achievement but includes a constellation of learning experiences – intellectual, kinesthetic, artistic, social, personal and vocational" (p. 33). However, this work still does not address fundamental questions of engagement that relate to the question about purposes of engagement, and the issue of possible substantive or evaluative differences among types of engagement.

According to Smith et al. (1998) a sense of connectedness with the school environment as an aspect of engagement "suggests that engagement is not an aspect of the student psyche alone. If students are to be engaged in their learning, other key players in the process, particularly teachers and administrators, must be engaged as well" (p. 10). Smith et al.'s conception seems to be a nested notion of engagement, such that engaged students, exist within a climate created by engaged and engaging teachers and administrators who operate within engaged schools located within communities. The implication seems to be that engagement is a result of the relationships among individuals and perhaps, groups. Consequently, "issues of how and why particular practices do or do not work, in the sense of engaging or failing to engage students, and questions of the sustainability and transferability of these practices are deeply related to context" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 33). This view is a clear example of how the second conception of engagement moves beyond engagement as an abstract and universal conception as exemplified in the traditional conception.

Smith et al. (1998) and Finn and Voelkl (1993) extend the notion of engagement beyond the classroom to the school and surrounding community.[2] According to Finn and Voelkl (1993) degrees or levels of engagement within schools range from attendance in class, to participation within the classroom, to involvement in extra-curricular activities. At its highest level, engagement is seen in the form of membership which ‘‘occurs’’ when students internalize the feeling that they ‘‘belong in school – both that they are a conspicuous part of the school environment and that school is an important aspect of their own experience’’ (p. 250). Finn and Voelkl (1993) identify the importance of a sense of community among peers as intrinsic to a sense of belonging to or identification with a school.

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[2] While we have referred to Finn and Voelkl's work as an example of the conservative stance, parts of their work, for example their point regarding engagement extending beyond the classroom, is consistent with the liberal position.

While we acknowledge the importance of relationships, a sense of community among peers does not necessarily lead to feelings of belonging to the school nor does it imply meaningful engagement with curriculum. It is possible for a sense of community among peers, for example, to emerge as a response to their feeling of ***not*** belonging to the school or feeling disconnected with or alienated from the curriculum (Ogbu, 1991). While a sense of community among peers could be an indication of belonging to the school and could be a sign of meaningful engagement with the curriculum, it could also be an expression of a ‘‘hidden curriculum’’ that the students develop (Portelli, 1993) and with which they feel connected.

An important contribution made by Cothran and Ennis (2000) to the discussion of student engagement is the inclusion of students’ voices. Although no definition of engagement is given, their work makes the following assumptions about student engagement. Firstly, it is still seen as linear, existing on a continuum from less to more. Secondly, it is something that teachers do to students, not something that students and teachers generate together. The assumption is that if teachers do x, y, and z or exhibit dispositions a, b, and c, then students will be engaged. For example, Cothran and Ennis (2000) report that ‘‘from the students’ perspectives, engaging teachers were those who communicated, cared, and enthusiastically presented active learning opportunities’’ (p. 111). Conversely, they claim that student engagement is low when teachers talked too much, appeared disinterested in their students, or ‘‘when students felt isolated from teachers and the decision-making process’’ (p. 112). While we agree that the qualities Cothran and Ennis identify are connected with engagement or disengagement (as other studies concur, for example, Smith et al., 1998), we have two concerns. First, the relationship between certain qualities of a teacher or teaching and engagement seem to be constructed or perceived in a rather simplistic and mechanistic cause-effect or one-to-one relationship. Second, although Cothran and Ennis (2000) should be lauded for their efforts to capture the voices of students about student engagement, their analysis of the students' perspective never raises the crucial questions of the worthwhileness of the curriculum or the purposes of engagement. In other words, while Cothran and Ennis help in reminding us of the importance of students' views about these matters, they seem to still accept the status quo or conservative stance regarding curriculum and the purpose of engagement, which, in turn implies a deficit approach towards students.[3]

A similar critique can be raised with Deiro's (1997) work. Deiro provides a list of strategies for teachers to adopt in order to create healthy relationships with students. She seems to assume that the building of these relationships is sufficient for, and leads to, student engagement. Moreover, her almost exclusive focus on methods leads to the problematic assumption that methods of teaching and an approach to teaching are identical. Such a conflation does not allow one to focus on the wider context of engagement. Deiro (1997) does not seem to recognize that there is not a necessary connection between teachers' attributes and strategies, and student engagement.

Consistent with Smith et al. (1998), Cothran and Ennis (2000), and Burke and Nierenberg (1998), Deiro's list includes the creation of individual time with students, the building and maintenance of relationships, and the belief in students' abilities to achieve high expectations. Deiro (1997) also includes the use of rituals and traditions. "Rituals and traditions help build a sense of community. They create a common experience for members, providing students with a common basis and a familiar routine" (Deiro, 1997, p. 201). We would argue that for each of these strategies it is crucial to consider how they are used and within which frameworks and contexts. To support this point we refer to a case study of a school, BC1, reported by Smith et al. (1998). BC1 incorporates Cree drumming, a powwow, Vietnamese dance and a mural depicting myths and legends from various cultures into the school. Given the framework within which the school seems to operate, the inclusion of rituals becomes a magnet for divisiveness in the school when questions arise as to whether too much attention is being given to First Nations culture and drumming is moved to a less central time and location. The report finds that although students worked on the creation of the mural, "not many of the kids seem to know the stories represented in the mural" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 73). There was also no evidence that engagement in social aspects of the school transferred into engagement in academics. Researchers discovered that there is a sense from the educators at BC1 that schools such as this one can focus either on academics or on relationships and rituals, but not both. As a result a deficit mentality pervaded the school in the form of lowered academic expectations for students.[4]

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[3] Our critique of Cothran and Ennis should not be reduced to the claim that their work is problematic simply because it does not embrace a critical theory stance. If that were the case, this, indeed would be a weak counter-argument. Our claim is that while certain aspects of Cothran and Ennis's work clearly goes beyond the conservative position and fits in with the liberal stance, there are aspects of their work that do not address the earlier critiques raised with the conservative position. In this regard, some of the assumptions of the liberal position are similar to those of the conservative one. Our critiques of Cothran and Ennis are not meant to devalue their positive contributions, but to highlight the need to move beyond traditional assumptions.

Although not specifically referring to student engagement, Burke and Nierenberg (1998) adopt a similar approach to that of Deiro (1997). They interview students in order to list the qualities of inspirational teachers and find that "teachers identified as inspirational were people who generally had a positive attitude about life in general, and about teaching and their students in particular" (p. 346). Furthermore, students report that "these teachers acted on their care and concern for students by being available often and showing a willingness to help them deal with a wide spectrum of personal issues" (Burke & Nierenberg, 1998, p. 345). The students' comments point to the importance of teachers' commitment to and investment of time in them. Based on the students' responses, it follows that it is not enough for teachers to express care for their students. Educators need to move beyond articulation and translate care into action. Although these educators are deemed to be, in some sense, inspirational, the question still is: for what?

Maeroff (1998) contends that traditional curriculum has failed in its efforts to engage large numbers of students. Meaning in academic work is derived "from seeing the relationship of parts of knowledge to the whole rather than dealing with isolated bits of information" (p. 214). Students are able to do this when they can make connections between their new learning and what they already know. One of the ways he suggests doing this is through entrepreneurial or school-to-work transition programs. Maeroff's notion of engagement has merit and is one that deserves further exploration since, for example, he argues that talk about standards is futile without students being engaged (p. 212) and suggests that schools need to alter curriculum and vary teaching styles (p. 213). However, his emphasis on school as preparation for work might be interpreted as a conservative conception of the purpose of education especially since he does not explicitly identify the problems with a narrow cause-effect relationship between school and work. In other words, the emphasis on apprenticeship programs and school-to-work transitions could result ultimately in simply conceiving of student engagement, at least for some groups of students, as a slotting and sorting mechanism, for employability and for maintenance of the status quo.

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[4] We are not suggesting that these activities should not have taken place. Rather we propose that these activities need to be taken more seriously and incorporated into the school from the perspective of a curriculum of life (Portelli & Vibert, 2001; Vibert & Portelli, 2002).

The examples offered under the second conception of engagement should be sufficient to establish our claim that this view addresses some of the concerns we raised with the first conception of engagement. The liberal or student-oriented conception of engagement does allow for a wider notion of "academic work and/or success" and it seeks to incorporate students' voices about engagement. As such, for the most part, it moves away from a "deficit model" of education and it attempts to identify qualities of teaching which are generally associated with a democratic perspective of teaching and education. However, in our view, this conception still has some major problems. None of the senses of student engagement offered question the purpose of engagement or the implicit assumption that the purpose of education is to preserve the existing social order. Although they do refer to degrees of engagement they do not consider the possibility of student engagement in relation to democratic and/or social transformation. In most instances, the treatment of engagement focuses exclusively or primarily on procedural matters, that is on teaching strategies or styles of teaching or attitudes teachers ought to adopt to enhance engagement. And while we agree that some approaches to teaching and certain human qualities exhibited by teachers are more worthwhile than others, such considerations do not substantially address the issue of the purposes of education and the issue of whether all forms of engagement are equally worthwhile. In the next section we deal with these issues by offering a conception of engagement based on a critical-democratic conception of education, as well as some justification for it.

## CRITICAL-DEMOCRATIC CONCEPTION OF ENGAGEMENT

There are different conceptions of democracy and critical thinking. With regard to the notion of democracy one needs to note two important distinctions; first, between democracy as a form of government and democracy as a way of life (Dewey, 1958), and second, between participatory or public democracy, on one hand, and protectionist or minimalist or managed/market democracy, on the other hand (Portelli & Solomon, 2001). The notion of democracy that informs our position is based on participatory democracy as a way of life. In short democracy is conceived as an ongoing reconstructive process ‘‘associated with equity, community, creativity, and taking difference seriously’’ (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, p. 17). Another significant component of this conception of democracy is that of ‘‘critical inquiry.’’ Consistent with this notion of democracy, critical inquiry is seen as an inquiry whereby students and educators develop knowledge, skills, values, dispositions and actions that are called for by a reconstructive conception of democracy. As Martin (1992) has argued, a spectator citizenry is inconsistent with critical democracy. If critical inquiry is to inform life, thought and action cannot be separated. Moreover, she concludes that ‘‘the best thinking in the world is of little avail if a person has not acquired the will, the ability, the skill, and the courage to act on it’’ (p. 178).

Student engagement in a critical democratic sense is *qualitatively* different from the two conceptions identified earlier. Like the concept of critical democracy, this notion of engagement includes both a procedural and a substantive aspect. Hence, engagement is not viewed *simply* as a matter of techniques, strategies or behaviours. In addition it has built into it intrinsically the purpose of democratic transformation. Engagement is realized in the processes and relationships within which learning for democratic reconstruction transpires. As a multifaceted phenomenon, engagement is present in the iterations that emerge as a result of the dialectical processes between teachers and students and the differing patterns that evolve out of transformational actions and interactions. As enacted, engagement is generated through the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction, through which personal transformation takes place.

Freire (1998) and hooks (1994) when commenting on student engagement argue for the importance of teachers being engaged with learning. Based on the view that there is no teaching without learning, Freire concludes that ‘‘[a]s a teacher, I cannot help the students to overcome their ignorance if I am not engaged permanently in trying to overcome my own’’ (1998, p. 89). In contrast to the notion of engagement as something that is either the responsibility of students, or something teachers do to students, hooks envisions engagement as a method of empowerment for students and teachers *alike*. Engaged pedagogy "means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Engaged pedagogy implies engaged students, teachers, communities, systems and structures. This latter claim, considered in itself, that is outside of the critical-democratic framework, can be considered to be not inconsistent with either the conservative or liberal stances. However, one needs to point out that when the notions of "engaged pedagogy" and "engaged teachers and students," for example, are connected with the beliefs associated with the critical-democratic framework, the meaning and enactment of this claim take a different form because these concepts are informed by differing and conflicting notions of purpose of schooling, empowerment, learning, role of teacher, conception of the student and the curriculum, and leadership (Cross, 1998; Vibert, Portelli, Shields, & LaRocque, 2002).

Consistent with Freire's understanding of the teaching/learning dynamic, Chavez and O'Donnell (1998) identify engagement as a phenomenon which "organically manifests within and between students and teachers within the temporal and spatial context" (p. 2). The temporal and spatial context goes beyond school buildings and timetables. It includes, for example, how the purposes and conception of education, individuals and groups are constructed within the teaching and learning environment, the nature of the relationships in the educative process, and the substantive issues that are raised and discussed and the way they are dealt with. The emphasis on the temporal and spatial context is crucial if teaching is conceived as "a text that has to be constantly read, interpreted, written, and rewritten. In this sense, the more solidarity there is between teacher and student in the way this space is mutually used, the more possibilities for democratic learning will be opened up in the school" (Freire, 1998, p. 89). Engagement occurs within a context of permeable classroom, school and community boundaries. According to hooks (1994), engaged pedagogy goes beyond the classroom and "must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (p. 11).

Taking engaged pedagogy seriously has implications to the way we envision curriculum, schools and communities (Cross, 1998). In the popular discourse curriculum is seen as official documents, disciplines, subject matter or content, plans, objectives, or student experiences. From a critical-democratic perspective, engaged pedagogy is consistent with a notion of curriculum that has been referred to as a "curriculum of life." While the curriculum of life does not ignore the significance of the aspects commonly associated with curriculum, "it is a view of curriculum as a dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts" (Portelli & Vibert, 2002, p. 36). In their depiction of a "curriculum of life" Portelli and Vibert (2002) describe the interconnectedness between classroom and the students' communities:

> Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience – without romanticizing either. It is an approach that is inconsistent with a deficit mentality common in many schools. (p. 38)

While we offer a view of engagement which addresses the concerns raised with the conservative and the liberal notions of engagement, we do not mean to suggest that the critical-democratic meaning of engagement should take only one form. In other words, we do not reduce engagement to a set of techniques, strategies or behaviours that are meant to be universally replicable regardless of context. In contrast, given the differences in the nature of social structures and interactions, a reductionist stance of engagement is untenable. Irrespective of the specific forms engagement can take, we believe that these forms need to be consistent with the purposes of education as conceived within a critical-democratic perspective, that is an education which engenders personal empowerment and personal and social transformation guided by the principles of equity, social justice, and inclusion (Armstrong & McMahon, 2002).

Within a critical democratic perspective, engagement involves addressing substantive issues and, as Chavez and O'Donnell (1998) claim, engagement means that teachers and students "do not accept the status quo and begin to unconsciously transform themselves to understand the status quo and place themselves into a location for liberatory action based on a praxis of social justice" (p. 2). This is compatible with the meaning of engagement as it is used by Anderson et al. (1998), Freire (1998), and hooks (1994). For hooks (1994) "commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of political activism." (p. 203). Anderson et al. (1998) emphasize the importance of questioning and challenging "authoritative discourses" so that "engaged classrooms are sites of resistance as students and teachers are engaged in a critique of power" (p. 275). Freire (1998) reinforces the interconnectedness of resistance and democracy, which he claims, “does not exist in the muteness of those who have been silenced but in the stirrings of those who have been challenged, in the doubt of those who have been prodded, and in the hopes of those who have been awakened” (p. 86).

The claims made by Chavez and O’Donnell, hooks, Anderson et al., and Freire, bring to the fore and answer the question whether all conceptions of engagement are equally valuable. The conservative and liberal perspectives see engagement as politically and educationally neutral, and as such serve to reinforce the status quo including the inequities embedded in it even if their aim is not consciously to do so. The critical-democratic perspective articulates a political and educational stance which recognizes existing inequities and believes in the possibilities of rectifying them. As hooks (1994), Simon (1992), and Freire (1998) acknowledge, this requires “teaching against the grain,” which, in turn, calls for courage and risk-taking. Given the current conservative institutional structures of schooling, the kind of engagement proposed in this paper may be more challenging to enact than the other two we have critiqued. However, if we believe in democratic values (such as, equity, fairness, inclusion, valuing difference, autonomy and connectedness, and open and free discussions), then the critical-democratic conception of engagement is the most consistent and plausible one to adopt.

In conclusion, if our argument is plausible, the following are some implications that emerge for research, policy and leadership. With regard to research, there needs to be more focus on the relationship between the underlying goals and purposes of education in a democracy, and conceptions of engagement, teaching and learning (see Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003). Empirical research on student engagement needs to be more foundationally oriented and take more seriously “educational praxis.” Some recent studies (for example, McNeil, 2000; Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Allen, 2001; Vibert & Portelli, 2000; Whitty, 2002) identify the contradictions, struggles and difficulties that educators encounter in making engagement from a critical-democratic perspective a reality. Policy makers have the moral obligation to create policies that move beyond lip service to preparing students for democratic citizenry, or in Mintrom’s words, “[r]ather than adopt policies that erode democratic practice, governments should be seeking ways to advance it” (2001, p. 640). In other words, they need to establish and support policies that enhance rather than hinder the possibility of critical-democratic engagement. And, in turn, this will require a shift in *conceptions* of leadership: from a managerial-functionalist perspective to an emancipatory and inclusive one

(Corson, 2000; Ryan, 2003), or as Blackmore (2002) puts it, we need to "put social justice on the leadership agenda" by focusing on "more substance and less style" (p. 215).[5]

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[5] For recent critiques of "traditional conceptions of leadership" and alternative explorations, see Portelli and Simpson (2002). Paulo Freire's administrative work in Brazil (1989–1991) offers a concrete example of a substantive and socially just example of leadership (Weiner, 2003).

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