

Engagement and Understanding

Two Questions to Consider

- *What does understanding and engagement actually look like in our classrooms?*
- *Are students understanding (retaining and reapplying) and deeply engaged in what they read and learn?*

What are the differences between...

- Compliance
- Participation
- Motivation
- Engagement?

What Does it Mean to be Engaged?

- Engagement is born of *intellectual urgency*. Engaged children often tell us through talk and action that they “*have to know more about*” a topic. They are willing to put time and considerable effort into learning more. They drive the learning with their own questions. Often, conflict is embedded in the experiences, concepts, and stories in which children are deeply engaged. We’re drawn to conflict and lean toward a resolution. Children are intrigued by conflict and may want to act to mitigate a problem in their community or the world. They believe that they just *have to* apply more attention to this text or idea.
- Engagement is often born of an *emotional resonance* to ideas—engaged children can describe experiences when a concept is imprinted in the heart as well as the mind. They are far more likely to remember the idea when a strong emotion is tied to a concept they’re learning or a text they’re reading. They may want to share their emotional reactions through writing, conversation, or art.
- Engagement is deepened by *perspective bending*—engaged children are aware of how others’ knowledge, emotions, and beliefs shape their own. When children talk and write about their beliefs, they are more engaged; they have a stake in the learning. They may be open to changing their thinking or beliefs when challenged and particularly relish the idea that their ideas can impact other learners. Their beliefs may bend, but rarely break.
- Engagement is often connected to a learner’s *sense of the aesthetic*—engaged children can describe moments when they find something beautiful or extraordinary, captivating, hilarious, or unusually meaningful. They may speak of a book or illustration, a painting, or an idea in science or math that seems to have been created just for them. They are drawn back to view it, discuss it, read it again and again. They claim the idea as somehow their own.

Boy Meets Painting. Painting Grabs Boy. Boy Mystified

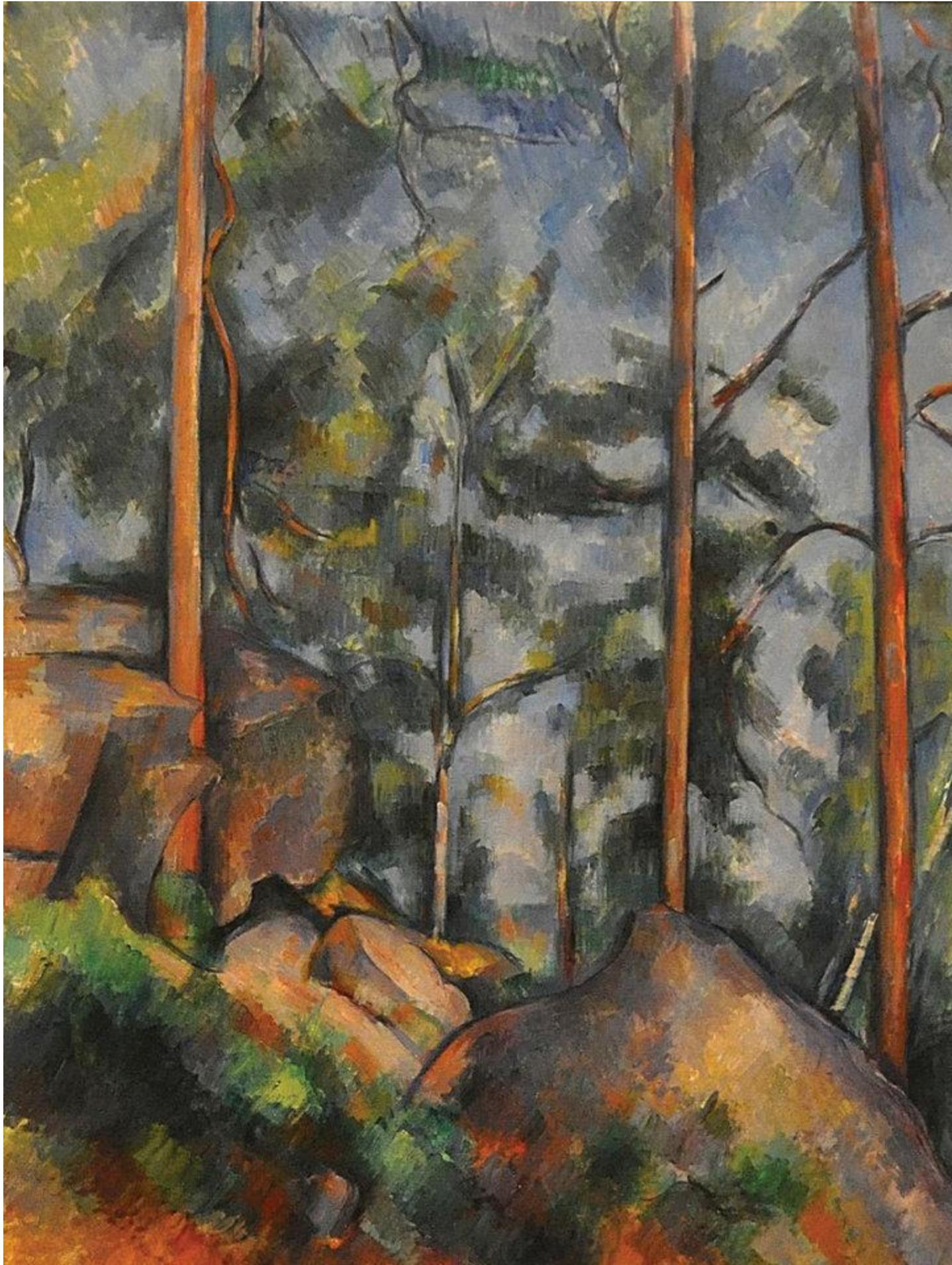
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Here's what I remember: The day it happened, I was around 8 years old, which puts me in the second grade. It was definitely a Sunday (because we never went anywhere on Saturdays). My dad had decided to take me to the Museum of Modern Art to see some paintings, and I always liked going places with my dad, it didn't matter where, so we arrived at the lobby, bought our tickets, handed them to a man who tore them in half, like at the movies. Then we took the escalator, walked into a big gallery, and as we were moving through — that's when it happened.

Grabbed By a Dead Man

I was walking behind my dad, trying to keep up, when something on the wall kind of flung itself at me, stopped me short, and (for lack of a better term) grabbed my eyes. I came to a full stop.



Stephen Sandoval/Museum of Modern Art, New York City, Lillie P. Bliss Collection

It was a woodland scene, a blur of greens, blues and purples, a tumble of rocks in the foreground, tall pines, branching into a blue sky, breaking up into arabesques. It had no people in it, no girls, nothing I recognized. But with a force that felt like a fist, it jerked my head to it — almost as if it were calling out, "You!" — like it knew me. Like it wanted to pull me to it and tell me something — something personal. But what? I had no idea. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. Furniture, pictures, carpets had always stayed in their place, being, after all, things. But not this thing. It had power.

As I moved closer, it tightened its grip. The boulders in the foreground were dark at the edges, light where the sun peeped through. The upper branches broke free and became little dabs of paint, applied in rhythmic strokes. Paint became tree; tree became paint. I knew nothing about painting, zilch about art history, but the crazy energy coming off that canvas felt like it was addressing some puzzle I already had in my head. I couldn't stop looking. I barely moved. My dad, who had turned around wondering where I'd gone, found me standing a few feet from the image, and when he came up behind me, without turning around, I asked him, "What is this?" And he, without looking for a label, answered, "This ... (and it was the first time I ever heard the name) ... is a Cezanne."



Stephen Sandoval/Museum of Modern Art, New York City, Lillie P. Bliss Collection

How Did Cezanne Do This To Me? I was 8.

To this day I cannot explain what happened to me. The fact that it kept happening — keeps happening, all these (almost) 60 years since — is one of the mysteries of my life. Cezanne produced precarious little worlds that almost, almost, almost lose their balance, but somehow hold themselves together, creating tension, beauty and danger all at once. But why would these crazy dares thrill an 8-year-old? What was it about me that was ready for Cezanne? Because I was *so* ready. Even in the second grade.

Here's all I can think: that when we are born, we are born with a sort of mood in us, a mood that comes to us through our genes, that will be seasoned by experience, but deep down, it's already there, looking for company, for someone to share itself with, and when we happen on the right piece of music, the right person, or, in this case the right artist, then, with a muscle that is as deep as ourselves, with the force of someone grabbing for a life preserver, we attach. And that's what happened to me that day.

I saw something on a wall that knew what I knew, felt what I felt and wanted me just as badly as I wanted it. When I left the museum I was a different boy. I had been addressed, *personally addressed*, by an artist whom I could never meet, who didn't speak my language, who had already been dead for 50 years. But I didn't care. His painting pulled me into a conversation I'd apparently been longing to have. It came at me with a force I will never forget and it began very simply. I looked at it. It looked at me, and all it said was, "Me too!" — and Cezanne and I have been talking ever since.



Courtesy of Sara Krulwich

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Essential Conditions for Engagement

Visible/Audible - what we see and hear in classrooms and schools	Invisible/Inaudible - what we sense in classrooms and schools
Teachers create rituals rather than rules, there is an orderly and predictable daily structure, routines, mutually agreed upon that are unique to this group of learners, that make the group feel that they are one-of-a-kind.	A climate of respect and civility, a tendency to engage in focused learning and to reflect on ideas of great import that connect to the world outside school and children's later lives. A daily sense of the joy in learning and playing alongside each other.
Teachers construct a warm and inviting environment that is as comfortable for adults as it is for children - they use book shelves to cordon off spaces for small group, large group and independent learning and cozy places to curl up and read, softer lighting, curtains and cushions, carpet, photographs of children at work and play and artifacts from shared experiences.	A sense that everything that can be done has been done to make children and adults feel that their spaces are their sanctuary, apart from a sometimes troubled world outside and absolutely safe, physically, emotionally and intellectually.
Music, photographs, and art are permanent and predictable elements of the classroom culture - children discuss what they find beautiful and work to leave an aesthetic legacy in the classroom. They discuss ways to make their own working spaces uniquely conducive to engagement.	An impression of being surrounded and engulfed in an aesthetic world - a world in which a learner can be immersed in something important and beautiful merely by being present each day.
It is visually evident which parts of the room are set aside for scholarly talk and which are kept for independent work that requires quiet concentration. The words of authors, including the student authors are sprinkled liberally throughout the room. The room is a tribute to words. Books that represent a diverse perspectives, cultures, characters, and authors are presented in inviting ways. The shelves are filled with books on fascinating topics from the social and natural world.	The sense of an abundance of time for in-depth discourse about books, writers and the ideas represented in language. Teachers and children display a reverence for ideas, feel a determination to grow continually stronger in using oral and written language to build understanding of a fascinating and complex world, understanding of the conditions we need to think deeply and a respect for spirited interaction <i>and</i> the silence we need to ruminate.
The teacher serves as lead learner, modeling how readers and writers live	A feeling that “we’re all in this together” and that there is no perfect,

<p>in the world and speaks frequently and openly about his/her interests, frustrations, successes, routines, rituals and tactics that make the way somewhat smoother. Teachers show that to be engaged is to embrace the struggle and revel in the joy of working through difficult problems.</p>	<p>complete learner - it is the work of a lifetime to use language effectively and explore ideas and that adults are working just as hard as children to do so.</p>
<p>Teachers use think alouds in whole group, small groups, and conferences to show what readers and writers think about in order to read with greater insight. Teachers focus on crafting their language to communicate clearly when writing and speaking.</p>	<p>A sense of awe about the “mysterious” workings of the human mind, but also a sense of clarity that smart is not something you are, it’s something you get. The teacher understands the importance of a growth mindset and building independence and agency in children and works hard to do so.</p>
<p>Children make most book and topic choices and regularly pursue topics of passionate interest--they have equal access to all materials, not just those at their “level”.</p>	<p>A significantly enhanced sense of ownership, an excitement about tackling challenging tasks because the children have chosen to do so and keeping a commitment matters. A sense of agency - an internal knowledge that each child has the capacity to tackle difficult challenges.</p>
<p>Children know when and why they work in specific texts to practice their word learning (surface structure skills) and when and why they work in text with challenging ideas for comprehension purposes (deep structure learning). They can articulate learning goals in both surface and deep structure learning. They can articulate goals toward which the class is working. They can articulate individual goals toward which they are working.</p>	<p>A sense of purpose - children read, write, and inquire not only for the joy in language but because they have very specific and ambitious goals toward which they are working and being mentored by other students and their teacher. As the school year progresses, children are more responsible for setting their own goals.</p>
<p>Children move about the room independently and purposefully, collecting the materials they need, replacing what they have used, caring for the spaces as they go. They value moving gently through the space, they are eager to guide visitors through the room, describing how it works for all within its walls.</p>	<p>A pervasive impression of caring for a precious space and the people within it, evident pride, clarity about how people mutually care for a space closely shared with others. A sense of empathy for other students, characters in books, and for those in the world outside school.</p>

Children *teach* rather than share when they have done work of great import with respect to their goals - they plan their teaching sessions with care, ensuring that they meet a variety of learning needs in the classroom and that their learners will be engaged and active - they seek to ensure that their learners will retain and reapply what they have taught.

Children share their ideas, not for the sake of sharing but because they believe others will benefit. They discuss complex topics that are current and relevant to their own and others' lives outside school. When pursuing topics as researchers, they consider implications of their findings in the social and natural world. They are attuned to other's needs and take action in and out of school settings to mitigate conflict in the world.

True engagement flourishes in certain classroom environments. We need to consider the visible and audible *and* the invisible and inaudible climate of the classroom.

What Engagement Looks Like

Set aside observation time each day. Stand back and observe the whole class during transitions and independent work time. Use one form for the *whole class*. During periods of observation, record students' names and the date in the appropriate cell. You may use this form for several weeks and compare students' growth in engagement. Be careful not to mistake compliance with engagement, and observe partners and small groups to ensure that they are truly collaborating, not just working on the same activity.

Child's level of engagement: note specific observations below the number you've chosen	1 (low)	2	3	4	5 (high)	Not observed
Shows intensity of attention to group work						
Shows intensity of attention to individual work						
Talks or writes about thoughts						
Talks, writes about, or exhibits emotions						
Talks, writes about, or demonstrates beliefs						
Talks, writes about, or takes action to solve problems						

Talks, writes about, or exhibits changes in thoughts, perspectives, beliefs, emotions						
Eagerly talks or writes about something in the aesthetic realm—finds beauty for himself or herself						
Savors the struggle—reports or shows behaviorally that he or she is willing to work through the “hard parts”						
Engages in intense but civil talk with others in which he or she changes his or her thinking or persuades another to change theirs—advocates for his or her own ideas						
Driven to learn more—expresses questions and a desire to learn more about a						

topic of passionate interest						
Revisits books and other experiences to understand more the second time						
Is purposeful about committing to memory—chooses to remember						

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