

CAN YOU HEAR ME?
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From listening to action on engagement in disadvantaged areas



A co-constructed definition of commitment

Commitment is a complex social phenomenon shaped by institutional, cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

From a societal perspective, commitment is implemented through three complementary aspects:

1. commitment to equity and social justice
2. a shared responsibility for building commitment
3. the conditions established by the educational community

In disadvantaged areas:

Commitment becomes a catalyst for empowerment and social transformation if it is based on the involvement of the entire educational community, which, working together, creates opportunities, reduces inequalities and paves the way for an educational environment that is equitable and brings about change.



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Introduction

This document is the result of collaboration among principals, vice-principals, teachers, education professionals, school-family-Community Development Agents, and researchers who form a co-development group¹ within **A Montreal School for All (AMSFA)**. It is intended to support educators by examining engagement as a path to educational success in Montreal's disadvantaged areas and was created in partnership with Marie-Odile Magnan, professor at the Université de Montréal's Faculty of Education.



For over 25 years, the mission of **A Montreal School for All** has been to contribute to the educational success of all students from Montreal's disadvantaged areas, while taking into account their needs and resources.

¹ A group of individuals who engage in critical reflection alongside the professionals from A Montreal School for All, as well as the researchers, and practitioners working in disadvantaged areas and who contribute to the ongoing development of the theoretical and practical framework for intervention in these areas. The starting point for this initiative is an assessment of the situation drawn up by practitioners working in disadvantaged areas.



Engagement, more than meets the eye

Engagement, like literacy and numeracy, is a key component of academic success and school retention. Yet, 'engagement' remains ambiguously and inconsistently defined in research. In psycho-educational terms, it is mostly linked to behaviour, typically assessed by observable behaviours and conformity to academic and institutional norms. AMSFA defines engagement differently, acknowledging that the achievement gap between students in disadvantaged and more advantaged areas often grows as they advance in their schooling. Unspoken assumptions in schools contribute to creating this gap and may lead to the mistaken impression that some students are disengaged.

Food for thought:

Who has the right to define engagement in schools?



Our co-development group questions the idea that engagement depends entirely on young people. The group recognizes that institutional, cultural, and socio-economic contexts shape engagement as we consider:

Are we all on an equal footing when it comes to engagement?

This question is closely tied to AMSFA's mission. As educators, it is essential that we adopt a critical and comprehensive approach to engagement—one that involves shared responsibility among everyone working in disadvantaged communities.



Disadvantaged and urban areas are often depicted as if their main problem is economic hardship. Recognition and symbolic issues of power, voice, inclusion and exclusion play a significant role in disadvantaged contexts when it comes to educational engagements.



When students "speak back": student engagement towards a socially just society. John Smyth, 2012

Towards a critical and a comprehensive sociological understanding of engagement



As part of an action research project entitled 'Engagement in Montreal's disadvantaged and multi-ethnic communities: a critical perspective focused on the co-construction of knowledge', in which the co-development group participated, a critical and comprehensive approach was adopted to rethink engagement in disadvantaged communities. This approach rejects the deficit model of student engagement, which holds students solely responsible for their engagement. Instead, it highlights the shared responsibility of educators and all those involved with children to foster and value engagement in all its forms.

Rejecting the deficit mindset means not blaming children or parents for shortcomings, nor insisting they adapt to existing school norms and expectations. We must challenge school and staff practices to achieve social transformation.

Food for thought:

What are our biases and beliefs, sometimes unconscious, about students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds? How might these biases and beliefs influence the engagement of young people and their parents? Explain.





Rethinking academic and institutional norms and expectations

A critical and inclusive approach challenges and analyzes the beliefs and prejudices rooted in a deficit-oriented mindset regarding the meaning of engagement.

It aims to understand how academic and institutional expectations can inadvertently exclude or marginalize those who have not been socialized into the school's dominant norms of engagement (McInerney, 2009; Freire, 1974). Inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire (1974), this approach views the school as a place of social transformation where staff have the opportunity to share their power by encouraging dialogue with children and developing non-hierarchical relationships with them. In this way, the approach involves a dialogue-based, democratic type of action: the school adapts to young people's everyday lives and to the broader social and political contexts that shape them. Engagement is viewed here from a social and collective perspective, relying on the actions and participation of all members of the educational community to bring it to fruition in disadvantaged areas.



Some adults believe that pupils who do not conform to school norms are disengaged. Without meaning to, they marginalize pupils who have not been socialized into the school's conventions.

Marie-Odile Magnan



Looking at engagement differently



Commitment is a social construct that must be collective and rooted in the principles of equity and social justice. This complex phenomenon is shaped by institutional, cultural, and socio-economic contexts and brings together three elements essential for educators: **responsibility**, **conditions**, and **attitude**.

« Can we realistically expect a child or an adult to be fully engaged in every aspect of their life at all times?



Member of the Co-development group on engagement in disadvantaged areas

Food for thought:

How can we use children's voices as a starting point to rethink the way we do things, think, teach and act as leaders?



I'd say that engagement isn't about forcing yourself to do something; it's more about being part of something and enjoying doing it.



Ivana, 11 years old

Responsibility

Responsibility, defined as being accountable for the consequences of our actions, is central to our commitment to educational success in disadvantaged communities. Shared responsibility means that all individuals are morally and socially involved in supporting students' overall engagement.

Areas for action

- > Re-examine the concept of school engagement to move away from a focus on student behaviour and refocus on the meaning students attach to their school experience and the degree of control they have over it.
- > Strengthen children's involvement in decision-making.
- > Encourage children to speak up in different contexts.
- > Encourage reflective, constructive dialogue about engagement.
- > Develop and maintain positive relationships that reduce the hierarchical dynamics between children and adults.



The focus is on co-constructing classroom culture with students to encourage reflection and provide opportunities for interaction and exchange on the learning process. The intent is not to manage behaviours, but to engage in shared, reciprocal conversations about learning.



Thinking the unthinkable: teachers who engage students' poverty in the class you can imagine.

Geoff Munns, 2012

Conditions

Conditions are the practical measures put in place to encourage children's engagement and enable them to get involved in their learning process in a genuine and meaningful way.

Areas for action

- > Encourage the active participation of all children.
- > Involve children in decision-making processes.
- > Create an environment free of judgment, blame and punishment.
- > Introduce practices which enrich their experience and acknowledge the backgrounds of children and their parents.
- > Offer diverse learning contexts that value peer support.



We rarely ask ourselves what conditions make engagement possible or even difficult, given the individual circumstances students experience in their daily lives.



Marie-Odile Magnan

Food for thought:

How can we work together with children – rather than on their behalf – to develop a vision of engagement that transforms our educational practices?



Attitude

Attitude refers to an ongoing, reflective self-examination of one's educational practices, a willingness to be open to others' histories, and recognition of one's own background, identities, and resources.

Areas for action

- > Think about how my words, attitude and comments affect others.
- > Believe in my own ability to take action and influence others' engagement.
- > Recognize children's right to express themselves and be heard.



Engagement is when you commit to something the way you want to. You engage in that action.



Walid, 10 years old

Three interrelated dimensions in support of engagement



Applying principles to guide our actions

To challenge prevailing beliefs regarding the engagement of children attending schools in disadvantaged areas, the co-development group agreed on three principles that are rooted in the critical sociological approach. These principles promote greater social and educational justice and are aimed at the entire educational community.



To be engaged is to make every action, every achievement, count.



Plan stratégique 2023-2027, MEQ, p. 14

Food for thought:

Couldn't it be possible to reflect on the concept of engagement with the children. How? Why?



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First principle:

Encourage children to express themselves so that they are recognized, valued and listened to as full members of society.

This principle recognizes and values all forms of expression, such as speech, the visual arts, dance, music and writing, to name but a few. Through this principle, children's ability to express their needs, talents, opinions and personal experiences is recognized. When children have rights² they are regarded as active participants in the present and as full citizens. This principle, therefore, implies that their perspectives must be taken into account in decision-making processes that affect them, in order to make school a genuine place of social transformation.

Views on childhood

Throughout history, children have been viewed as beings in the making, whose reasoning can only develop over time and through learning. Alternatively, as beings with a distinct status who progress through various stages. Or, finally, as full citizens possessing both a personal and a social conscience.



A voice that is not heard is a voice robbed of its power to act.

Diane Farmer



I believe that when the right conditions are in place, teachers are inspired to do more for their students, **enabling them to think outside the box** and develop their talents, skills, tastes and diverse interests...

School Principal



² Convention on the Rights of the Child

Second principle:

Recognize and promote diverse forms of engagement by adopting a non-deficit-based approach.

The engagement of children, families and the community can take forms that differ from those recognized and valued by the school system. In disadvantaged areas, families often do not manage to make their views heard or recognized. These various forms of engagement – such as helping a younger student with their homework, being there for a sick grandparent, or taking part in language learning or an extracurricular activity – make a valuable contribution to school life. This principle is based on an empowering vision of engagement, namely an approach that values the capacities and strengths of children, families and the community. By recognizing these forms of engagement, the school sees the child in all aspects of their life, rather than simply as a *student*. This principle takes into account everyday practices and community support networks, which enrich children's experiences. Such a holistic and systemic approach enables us to better understand children and ultimately support them more effectively.



Third principle:

Active and positive contributions to the process of engaging children

Engagement cannot rest solely on students and their families; it requires the active and supportive involvement of the educational community. Every member of this community, through their role, contributes to creating conditions that support children's engagement. This process is not linear and varies over time. It is a complex social phenomenon, influenced by institutional, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, and shaped by the meanings and values that children attach to their school experiences. We cannot change these contexts, but we can influence, or even transform, the school environment by examining our own practices to support students' engagement.



Food for thought:

Can engagement be the same when social and educational realities prove to be inequitable?



What if we were all responsible for engaging children in disadvantaged areas?

The co-development group on engagement with the perspective of educational success in Montreal's disadvantaged areas offers a fresh insight into the concept of engagement by challenging conventional understandings and thinking.

The reflections, exchanges, and testimonials gathered from members of the co-development group highlight the importance of viewing engagement as a shared responsibility among students, families, and all stakeholders in the educational community.



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Food for thought:

Do all children experience engagement in the same manner?



This comprehensive and critical approach to engagement in disadvantaged communities is rooted in a vision of empowerment, social transformation and accountability. This approach analyzes the functioning of the education system to understand how certain practices and processes within our schools may affect children's engagement, learning, and, ultimately, educational success in disadvantaged areas. A Montreal School for All asks us to treat engagement in disadvantaged communities as a complex social phenomenon, influenced by institutional, cultural and socio-economic contexts.

In a world in constant flux, it is essential to rethink our educational practices in order to engage all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. AMSFA, therefore, calls for us to place the children's own perspectives, knowledge and interests at the heart of our thinking. Children are keenly aware of their own reality and that of their community; they can shed light on the meaning they attribute to their learning, their engagement and their place in society.

In disadvantaged communities, the issue of engagement takes on an even more critical dimension. It is a matter of equity and social justice. Reflecting on our actions and our educational attitudes then becomes an unavoidable collective responsibility, to be shared with the whole community involved. It is on this basis that we can truly open up possibilities for every child, recognize their often-overlooked potential, and build a genuinely inclusive school, where everyone finds their place, their voice and a sense of purpose in their educational journey.

Food for thought:

*Is the experience of school the same for all children?
Why or why not?*



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To build a truly equitable school, we must begin by seeing, listening to and recognizing children in all their uniqueness, with their strengths, their challenges and their dreams. It is only then that engagement will take deep root and bear fruit far beyond the school walls.



Activities

An engaged or disengaged child?

Intention

Debunking misconceptions about the idea of the *engaged child versus the disengaged child*

Activity instructions

- > Sort the statements in the table below, explaining your choices (because...)
- > Share and explain your choices with the whole group
- > Discuss with the whole group the limitations of an approach that views engagement solely in terms of the behaviours observed and valued by the school. For example, why is it relevant for the school to know and acknowledge that Eva is a member of her school's drama group? (Reference to Principle 2: Recognize and promote diverse forms of engagement by adopting a non-deficit-based approach)

1. Eva plays with her eraser during French class.
2. Mr. Roberts, Jeremy's father, did not turn up for a scheduled meeting with the teacher.
3. Louis comes to school every day with his supplies and a packed lunch.
4. Rana is 10 to 15 minutes late every morning for school.
5. Tommy never does his homework.
6. Muhammad gets 95% on all his tests.
7. Zineb is well-liked and hard-working at school.
8. Eva is a member of the theatre group run by her local community organization.
9. Mr. Roberts is a caregiver for his elderly mother.
10. Louis is struggling in several subjects.
11. Rana takes the city bus with her older brother to come to school every morning.
12. Tommy plays hockey three nights a week.
13. Muhammad spends his time doodling in his exercise books.
14. Zineb often feels that life at school is too hard.

Classification of statements

Disengaged

Engaged

Because



Are we all equal when it comes to engagement?

Intention

To get people thinking about the topic

- > Yes/No, why?
- > What institutional, cultural and socio-economic factors might influence the engagement of students and staff?
- > What can we do to create conditions that encourage the engagement of all children attending schools in disadvantaged areas?
- > What are the benefits of recognizing other forms of engagement for children outside of school?



In disadvantaged areas, what challenges arise in evaluating learning and student engagement?



Intention

Rethinking evaluation practices and their impact on student engagement

Task 1

Identify the key issues relating to the evaluation of learning and student engagement

- > Divide into X teams (flipchart)
- > Return to the whole group with a spokesperson to discuss the issues

Task 2

In children's own words: what do they think of evaluation?

Present the students' answers.

What is the purpose of evaluation?

- > To find out how big our brains are.
- > So, we don't have to repeat the year.

What counts as a good mark?

- > It's 90% or above, or 80%.
- > It's when our parents are proud of us.
- > It's when you're proud of yourself.

When I give you a B, or 70%, or 18 out of 25, how do you feel?

- > I find it hard to breathe.
- > I feel awful. It's a bad mark.
- > I can't wait to tell my parents because I've worked hard.

What is the school report for?

- > To stress us out.
- > To keep track of our marks and help us improve.
- > To see if our parents will react to bad marks.
- > To find out whether we've passed the year or not.

Whole-class discussion

- > What do you make of these children's comments?
- > Do you see a connection between the issues identified in Task 1 and the children's comments?
- > What would your students think?
- > How might evaluation affect some students' disengagement?
What is our responsibility?

Glossary

Dialogic action: An action that encourages shared (bilateral, reciprocal) exchanges, based on listening and respect, between children and school staff, with the aim of making the school a place of social transformation.

Educational community: The educational community comprises all those involved with children and shares a collective responsibility for promoting engagement and educational success in Montreal's disadvantaged areas. This community transcends the traditional boundaries of the school to include all stakeholders who contribute, directly or indirectly, to the educational process and the development of children.

Forms of engagement: Refers to all the family, school, professional, and social engagements that can involve both children and adults.

Horizontal relationship: A fundamental relational approach within a critical and comprehensive understanding of educational engagement. It refers to an egalitarian and democratic relationship between school staff and children, characterized by the sharing of power, authentic dialogue and the breaking down of traditional hierarchies. This concept, inspired by Paulo Freire's (1974) thinking, aims to transform power dynamics in the educational setting to enable children's empowerment and genuine engagement.

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« ENGAGEMENT MEANS GIVING YOUR ALL TO
SOMETHING, SUCH AS AN OBJECTIVE, AND
WORKING TOGETHER.

Maxime, 11 years old

