THE INVITING CLASSROOM

Visitors to Mark Castro's classroom always say the same thing: "The students were so engaged! There were no behavior problems, and they all seemed to be working on complex and interesting tasks." It should go without saying that this does not just happen by chance. Mr. Castro works hard to ensure that the learning environment is conducive for all students' developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Entering Mr. Castro's classroom, visitors typically note the organization of the environment. There are a number of different desk and seating options, from stools to exercise balls to standing tables. They also tend to notice the environmental print; the walls are rich with information that the class has obviously created together. When they finally look down, visitors often notice that students sit in groups and are usually involved in different tasks. Some groups have laptops and iPads on their tables, while others have printed texts. Visitors often ask Mr. Castro whether he has an electronic device for every student. His response is instructive. He says, "Yes, I do, but I don't have students using the devices at the same time. Doing so encourages more individual, independent work, and I want to make sure that my students have lots of opportunities to talk with their peers as they wrestle with the learning expectations. In fact, it's rare for me to have all of the technology out at once. The last time I did was for state testing, last spring."

Visitors also notice the range of interactions students have within the classroom. Some groups are engaged in animated discussions, and others are sitting knee to knee, talking with a partner. At one table, a group of students is discussing the questions that they want to ask another group.

"I think that we should first ask about the big idea," Andrew says, *"Like why the author wrote this."*

Tierra agrees. *"I like that because I don't think we should just start with the details because then it gets too boring to just find the information that's right there."*

"But I do think we should have some detail questions ready because there are some important things to remember, but they can come after the big ideas,"

Brianna adds. *"Remember, we're supposed to be making sure that they under-stood this [pointing to the paper]. Who knows how we will be asked to show that we understand? So I think we need to make sure that details are included."*

Andrew responds, *"Good point. Can we each write one question and then ask each other the questions so that we can test them out and talk about them?"*

The group gets to work.

Mr. Castro walks around the room, stopping in to meet with various groups of students as they complete learning tasks. Periodically, Mr. Castro interrupts the activity and draws students' attention.

During one lesson, he said, *"I think we might have found a really cool error. Let's talk through this to see if it's an error because, if it is, we can all learn from it."* Mr. Castro continues, explaining the response from a student and allowing the class to discuss the response and where thinking might have gone astray. Visitors often note the framed poster that reads, "We celebrate errors as opportunities to learn."

Visitors are never surprised to learn that Mr. Castro's students perform exceptionally well on the state achievement tests. But they are surprised to learn that all of his students are at risk for educational failure in one way or another. They all live in poverty, and many have attended multiple schools. Several students are learning English as an additional language, and five of his 33 students have identified disabilities. When asked about his students' achievement, Mr. Castro is humble and simply says, "My students want to learn. They just need to be shown the way." In a large part, Mr. Castro's students achieve because they are engaged in learning.

Are Students Engaged?

Have you ever had someone visit your classroom and say something like, "Four students were not engaged"? Or perhaps you were the one who said that. What evidence is used to make that statement? Most likely the statement was based on behavioral engagement rather than cognitive engagement. To us, there is a significant difference between

Video 1
What Is Engagement?

resources.corwin.com/ engagementbydesign

To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

behavioral and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement is easy to observe. Typically, we think students are engaged if they track the speaker with their eyes, sit up in the chair, and generally look like they are paying attention. In general, we call these actions "teacher-pleasing behaviors" because they do just that, make teachers (and administrators) happy. But they don't necessarily mean that students are learning.

Consider two students in the same class. Brandon sits next to the window and always seems more interested in the events that occur outside. If you came to the classroom, you might say that Brandon was not engaged in learning. However, if you talked with Brandon, he could tell you everything that was said, as well as all of the happenings with squirrels and people outside. Two rows over from Brandon is Heber. Heber tracks the teacher as she speaks, holds a pencil as if ready to write at any second, and sits still in his chair. However, if you asked Heber what the lesson was about, he would probably not be able to tell you. Of course, there are other students in the class for whom there is a better match between their behavioral and cognitive engagement, but it can be hard to tell the difference between the two.

A few years ago, we were interested in the impact that teacher-pleasing behaviors could have on teachers' perceptions and students' learning. We taught one teacher-pleasing behavior to a group of 36 students each week. They happened to be ninth graders, and their other teachers did not know that we were focused on these behaviors. One week we had them greet their teachers upon entering the classroom. For the next couple of weeks, we focused on SLANT:

S = Sit up straight in the chair

L = Lean forward toward the teacher

A = Act interested

N = Nod and smile occasionally

T = Track the teacher with your eyes

In the weeks following SLANT, we had them make physical contact with their teachers (handshake, fist bump, high five, etc.). Then, we asked

them to keep their notebooks open on the table and to hold a pen or pencil at all times. We continued, teaching students to ask relevant questions, praise the teacher, and to provide cues or redirections for other students in the class. By the end of the semester, the 34 students (two transferred out) had statistically higher grade point averages than all other ninth graders. And their citizenship grades were incredible: All of them had earned "excellent" or "very good" on their citizenship grades.

We tell this story to highlight that there can be a positive relationship between behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and learning. If you think about it, when this group of students engaged in teacher-pleasing behaviors, their grades probably increased because the teachers noticed them a bit more. But then, their grades probably increased because they were actually paying more attention to the class and were actually learning the content better. Yes, behavioral engagement is important, but we also worry about students like Heber whose behavioral engagement masks his cognitive disengagement.

That's why monitoring cognitive engagement is essential. It is easier to tell whether students are cognitively engaged when the classroom is filled with discussion and dialogue. As students interact with each other and their teachers, their thinking becomes evident. It is public and available for others to respond to. It becomes fodder for future lessons and interactions that continue to shape students' understanding of the world. In other words, discussion and dialogue provide students and their teachers with evidence of cognitive engagement and of learning.

That was the long way around to say that engagement is our goal, both cognitively and behaviorally. In fact, we believe that engagement in learning is one of the major contributors to student achievement. Said another way, it's hard for students to learn when they're not engaged. To nerd out a bit, there is considerable neuroscience that confirms this point. Here's the chain reaction. For learning to occur, the student has to engage in selective attention, which means that the student is selecting specific information and inputs over all other possibilities. To make this more concrete, to learn how to spell the word *surreptitious*, the student would first have to attend to the lesson (or letters, if studying alone) and

not the train horn in the distance, the sound of a new text message, the desire to know the score of the game, the feeling of dread at failing, or any of thousands of possible other stimuli.

From selective attention, the student has to move to sustained attention, focusing long enough to process information. This involves working memory and storage functions that are very complicated. The student will also need to make connections between the new information, in this case the spelling of *surreptitious,* and previously known information. To remember the information and to be able to use the information, the student will need practice and rehearsal, all while still paying attention. Taken together, this process is what we mean when we say that a student cognitively engages. To pay attention, to engage working memory, to practice and rehearse, and to use information requires that students engage, and they are more likely to do so in classrooms that are inviting.

Intentionally Inviting Classrooms

Although school is compulsory, learning is not. The act of learning is analogous to a dance between teacher and learner. However, an unwilling dance partner upsets the equation. You may think we're referring to the learner, but actually we mean the teacher. Much like the lead dance partner, the teacher guides the student through the choreography. The best leads convey a sense of invitation throughout, through missteps and moments of fluidity. *I've got you. We're in this together.* But the teacher who doesn't attend to the invitational elements risks a reduced impact on learning. This effect snowballs, as the teacher who doesn't get results begins to experience a decline in self-efficacy. *I just don't have good dance partners*, the thinking goes. *If I had better dancers, I'd get better results.*

An invitational stance to learning is key to getting results. Purkey and Novak (1996) describe invitational education through four lenses. The first is *trust*, which describes the ongoing relationships between the teacher and students. In trusting classrooms, teachers and students assume positive intentions and seek to build, maintain, and repair those

---

An invitational stance to learning is key to getting results.

Video 2
The Intentionally Inviting Classroom

resources.corwin.com/ engagementbydesign

relationships. In other words, trust involves the shared invest-ment we place in other human beings. Trust is a mediating factor in group cohesion, academic risk-taking, satisfaction, and prob-lem resolution. It forms the bedrock of any high-functioning classroom.

The second element of invitational education is *respect*. This con-dition is fostered through actions that communicate an under-standing of everyone's autonomy, identity, and value to the learning community.

Shared responsibility is crucial, and members of the classroom, includ-ing the teacher, see themselves as stewards for maintaining the social and emotional well-being of others.

Optimism is the third element in Purkey and Novak's (1996) construct and arguably our favorite. The assumption is that the potential of each classroom member is untapped and that every member of the classroom is responsible for finding ways to help others reach their potential. Teachers are important in creating optimistic learning environments, and so are students. In an inviting classroom, students support the learning of their peers and understand that they are key in others' learn-ing. Purkey and Novak believe that life without hope impairs a per-son's ability to move forward. If schools are not places to find hope, then what use are they?

That leads us to the fourth element: *intentionality*. An invitation to learning means that the practices, policies, processes, and programs of classrooms and schools are carefully designed to convey trust, respect, and optimism to all. And by *all*, we mean students, staff, and com-munity members. But what we say we do and what *happens in reality* can be two different things, thereby undermining a hope-filled school. Intentionality is, well, intentional.

Teachers can choose to be intentional or not. And they can also be inviting or not. Purkey and Novak (1996) noted that these two options resulted in four different types of teachers (see Figure 1.1).

> ## Elements of Invitational Education
>
> 1. Trust
> 2. Respect
> 3. Optimism
> 4. Intentionality

FOUR TYPES OF TEACHERS

Intentionally uninviting teachers . . .	Intentionally inviting teachers . . .
• Are judgmental and belittling • Display little care or regard • Are uninterested in the lives and feelings of students • Isolate themselves from school life • Seek power over students	• Are consistent and steady with students • Notice learning and struggle • Respond regularly with feedback • Seek to build, maintain, and repair relationships
Unintentionally uninviting teachers . . .	Unintentionally inviting teachers . . .
• Distance themselves from students • Have low expectations • Don't feel effective and blame students for shortcomings • Fail to notice student learning or struggle • Offer little feedback to learners	• Are eager but unreflective • Are energetic but rigid when facing problems • Are unaware of what works in their practice and why • Have fewer means for responding when student learning is resistant to their usual methods

Figure 1.1

- **Intentionally uninviting teachers,** although thankfully rare, can leave an indelible mark on a person. Nancy still shudders when she recalls her sixth-grade teacher, who gave demeaning nicknames to students, including one the teacher called "Funeral," because "your face looks like you just came from one." Such teachers are harsh and vindictive and have no place in any school. The one bright spot is that school leaders did their jobs, and this was the only year the woman taught in Nancy's school.

- **Unintentionally uninviting teachers** are, unfortunately, more common. These teachers hold low expectations of their students, which is often the product of disillusionment and a

damaged sense of self-efficacy. They blame students and their circumstances when learning stalls. It's not that they dislike children—in fact, it's often just the opposite. But they don't perceive why students don't like their classes or respond enthusiastically to their teaching. Beyond the damage they do at the classroom level, they undermine school improvement efforts by responding negatively and pessimistically. *That will never work with* these *kids*, they say. School leaders often work around these folks rather than with them, unfortunately deepening their diminished sense of efficacy.

- **Unintentionally inviting teachers** are full of enthusiasm for what they do and the students they teach, but they lack the ability to reflect on their practices. Although they may be successful with most students, they don't have the capacity to dig deeper when they encounter a hard-to-reach student. That's because they haven't explored what is working and why. Don't believe the axiom that teachers are born, not made. Unintentionally inviting teachers operate under this misconception. In time, and after too many failures, they become unintentionally disinviting teachers, who also lack the self-perception to analyze successes and challenges.

- **Intentionally inviting teachers** know that becoming a great teacher is purposeful, and they believe that continuous improvement is key. They are consistent and reliable and embody a growth mindset about themselves and their students. Most important, they are perceptive about their students at an individual level, and they know their students well because they invest daily in relationship building. At its best, an invitational classroom permeates the entire milieu, including classroom procedures, the physical environment, and the relationships between teacher, student, and content. Intentionally inviting teachers understand that "*everybody* and *everything* adds to, or subtracts from, connecting with students," and they strive to constantly interrogate their practices (Purkey, 1991, p. 7).

We hope that all classrooms are intentionally inviting places in which students learn. To our thinking, there are easier and harder places to start

Don't believe the axiom that teachers are born, not made.

Video 3
The Intentionally Inviting Teacher

resources.corwin.com/ engagementbydesign

to change a classroom (or school) that is something other than intentionally inviting. We recommend starting with the low-hanging fruit.

Low-Hanging Fruit

The *Urban Dictionary* defines *low-hanging fruit* as "targets or goals which are easily achievable and which do not require a lot of effort" (http://www.urbandictionary.com). In our search for what works best, we've discovered that some of the research-based solutions are time consuming, expensive, or impractical. For example, some have argued that 1:1 computer initiatives are an answer to student engagement issues (see Harper & Milman, 2016, for a 10-year review). To implement a 1:1 initiative, the district has to have a lot of money and a lot of capacity to ensure implementation. Just look at the efforts of Los Angeles Unified School District. Their well-meaning technology effort failed to realize gains and, in many places in the district, was never even implemented.

Some evidence-based solutions seem to work in the proverbial lab, but they have never been tried in actual classrooms, which are complex and diverse. For example, the theory of matching students' learning styles with classroom instruction is appealing and has a surface logic to it. It seems reasonable to suggest that students whose preferred learning style is visual-spatial could achieve more if taught that way. But the theory doesn't really work out in actual classroom implementation. In fact, there is no compelling evidence that matching learning style with instruction will accelerate achievement.

Having said that, it's important to note that there are also research-based recommendations that seem quite reasonable to implement. They are understandable, they translate well into classroom practice, they are not too expensive, and they don't require extensive professional learning to implement. For us, that's the low-hanging fruit that we are interested in. And to extend the metaphor even further, once the low-hanging fruit has been harvested, then we can pay attention to high-hanging fruit. After all, why go after the hardest to implement school improvement effort when there are easier to implement tools that have not been tried?

One of the places we, and millions of other people, go to for inspiration on what to implement next is John Hattie's (2009) seminal review of educational research. Hattie has synthesized thousands of research studies and calculated effect sizes to determine which influences have a strong likelihood of success in terms of students' learning. Effect size is a statistical tool used to determine the average impact of a specific influence or action. Hattie was able to scale these various influences to determine which of them worked best. As Hattie noted, 95% of what teachers do works, if they expect zero growth for the year. Yes, you read that right. If you do not expect any growth, then teachers and schools do little harm. But we should expect students to grow at least a year for each year that they are in school. And some students need to grow a lot more to catch up to where they should be. Thus, it seems reasonable that we should focus on influences, strategies, and actions that have a chance of ensuring that students learn at least a year for each year that they are in school. According to Hattie, an effect size of 0.40 equals one year of learning for one year of school. Thus, we should generally focus on actions that exceed an effect size of 0.40.

But which ones should be tried first? Hattie has calculated effect sizes for nearly 200 influences on students' learning. We wondered, *Where is the low-hanging fruit?* What combination of these influences could be useful in ensuring that students learn? How could this seemingly random collection of influences be organized in such a way that teachers, teams, and entire school systems could get started on improving the experiences students have?

> Only 38% of students report that their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives.

Student Voice

In addition to citing the seminal work of John Hattie (2009) and other researchers with insights to offer on the topic of engagement, we will be drawing heavily on the voices of students themselves, as one of our core beliefs is that students have something to teach us. Throughout this book, we will reference current results from the Quaglia Student Voice Survey. A total of 48,185 students in Grades 6 to 12 and 12,157 students in Grades 3 to 5 took the Student Voice Survey during the 2015–2016

school year, representing 249 schools across 14 states. Underpinning data results from the Student Voice Survey are three primary goals:

1. Share what we are learning from the voices of students

2. Present data in a manner that is understandable rather than overwhelming, and provide a useful context

3. Provide valuable suggestions and next steps that demonstrate how the information gleaned from the Student Voice Survey can have an immediate impact in schools

> Only 52% of students report that their teachers make an effort to get to know them, and only 43% believe teachers care about their problems and feelings.

For a full account of these survey results, see the 2016 National School Voice Report, which can be downloaded for free at www.quagliainstitute.org.

We cannot assume that because kids talk the student voice is present, and it is important that we do not confuse voice with complaints or challenging authority. When we work to develop skills to effectively utilize their voice, we focus on three things designed to support students (and adults!):

- **Listening.** Listening more than trying to convince others to agree with their existing perspectives

- **Learning.** Making an intentional and authentic effort to learn from what they hear when listening

- **Leading.** Taking responsibility to lead with others in taking actions that will make the world a better place (Quaglia, 2016)

Why are we so passionate about amplifying student voice? Not only because we think it is the right thing to do, but also because impact analysis studies have shown us that when students have a voice in school, they are seven times more likely to be academically motivated. That is something worth working for!

Engagement by Design

As we have noted, if learners fail to pay attention, engage, and use their voice in a meaningful way, they're not likely to learn. It seems obvious,
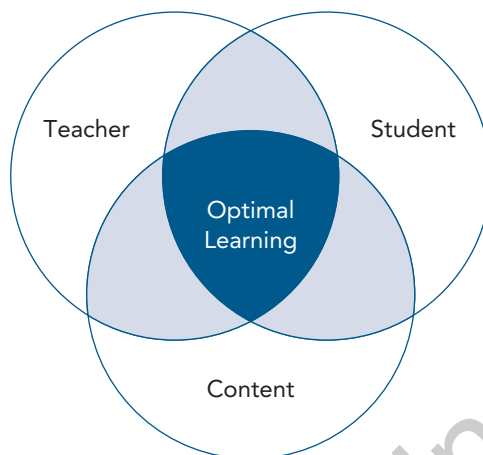
Figure 1.2

but too often we see classrooms where teachers are "teaching" (or at least telling) but no one is paying any attention. Students pay attention when the lesson is engaging, but we use the word *engaging* differently from some others. We aim for cognitive engagement, which is much harder to monitor. Cognitive engagement—and thus optimal learning—comes from the intersection of the teacher, the student, and the content (see, e.g., City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Tietel, 2009). We like to think of this in terms of overlapping circles that provide a balanced approach to the learning experience (see Figure 1.2).

Take the overlap of the student and the teacher. The amount of overlap between those two theoretical circles is a relationship (see Figure 1.3). And yes, relationships are important and impact student learning. In fact, Hattie (2009) found that teacher-student relationships have an effect size of 0.72. Yet only 52% of students report that their teachers make an effort to get to know them, and only 43% believe teachers care about their problems and feelings. Clearly, some people do not yet understand the value of relationships. In fact, Doug remembers his well-meaning supervisor from his first year whose advice was, "Don't
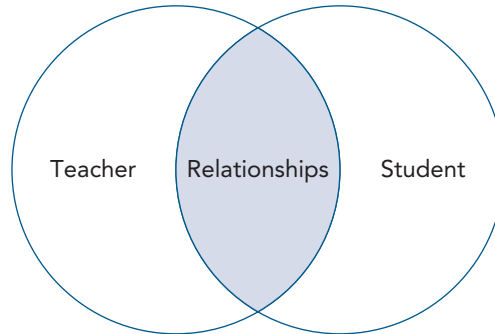
Figure 1.3

smile until winter break." Doug took the advice and avoided asking students questions about their interests and didn't tell them anything about his passions. Needless to say, Doug's students didn't learn much that year. It was terrible advice. Instead, Doug's advisor should have said, "Do all you can to develop strong, productive, growth-producing relationships with students." And parenthetically, positive teacher-student relationships are low-hanging fruit. Teachers can choose their attitudes toward students and can purposefully work to develop positive relationships. That's why we think of this as one piece of low-hanging fruit.

Let's take another overlapping set of circles, this time between the teacher and the content (see Figure 1.4). We think of this overlap as teacher clarity. Teachers should know their content. They should not be teaching incorrect information or missing critical aspects of the content. They should also let students know *what* they are supposed to be learning and *why*. However, only 38% of students report that their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives. Further, teachers and students should understand what
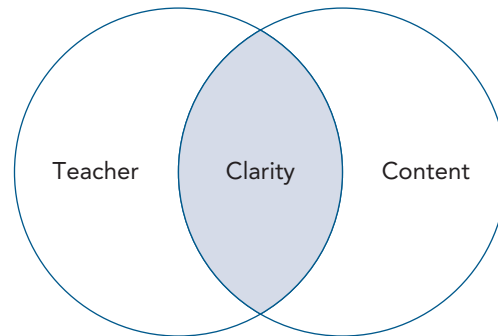
CLARITY

Figure 1.4

success looks like. Teacher clarity—the combination of teachers knowing what they are supposed to be teaching, informing students about what they are supposed to be learning, and reaching agreements with students about the success criteria—has a strong impact on students' learning. According to Hattie (2009), the effect size of teacher clarity is 0.75. Really, it's not that hard to figure out what students need to learn. It requires an understanding of the standards and a willingness to identify what students already know. It's also not hard to inform students about the daily learning intentions, nor is it hard to identify what success looks like. Teacher clarity is another piece of low-hanging fruit that is all too often left on the learning tree, ignored by otherwise well-intentioned teachers.

The third possible overlapping circles are formed by considering the student and the content (see Figure 1.5). The amount of overlap between these two is known as challenge. Students appreciate a worthy challenge. According to Hattie (2009), a high level of challenge has an effect size of 0.57. Students are not interested in low-level, boring lessons, and 43% of students report that currently, school *is* boring! They

> Teacher clarity—teachers knowing what they are supposed to be teaching, informing students about what they are supposed to be learning, and negotiating success criteria with students.
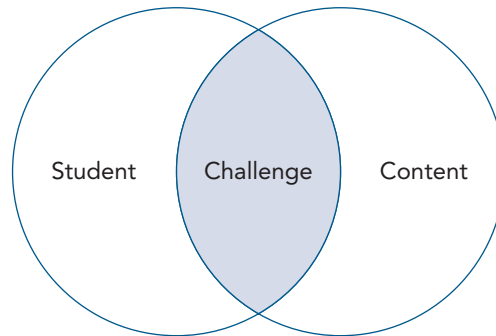
CHALLENGE

Figure 1.5

expect school to be a challenge, and they welcome the opportunity to rise to the challenge. Seventy-three percent of students tell us they put forth their best effort, and 85% say getting good grades is important to them. Of course, a high level of challenge requires that teachers create appropriate tasks and that they hold high expectations for students. Again, challenge is a low-hanging fruit and one that is easily within the reach of the teacher.

But what happens when we put all three of these circles together? If we overlap the student circle with the content circle and the teacher circle, there is a place where they all touch, and that is engagement.

Students engage when they have relationships with teachers who know their content and who make sure learning is relevant, interesting, and challenging. The experiences that teachers plan need to take into account each of these. Downloading a lesson from the Internet may help with planning, but it may not be responsive to a given group of students. There is no perfect lesson plan, and there is no one right way to teach content. Teachers are always designing and adjusting their lessons based on the students in their classes.

Conclusion

Effective classrooms don't just happen. They are led by teachers who deeply understand their craft and the essential nature of the interaction between student, teacher, and content. These teachers strive to be intentionally inviting, in that they build and monitor the ways in which their classroom practices, policies, processes, and programs align to send a welcoming and supportive message. You've undoubtedly set foot in these places before; perhaps your own classroom is a model of invitation. In the chapters that follow, we will further explore the nature of relationships, clarity, and challenge to optimize engagement. And as with any invitation, it begins with a welcoming message.

73% of students say they put forth their best effort, and 85% say getting good grades is important to them.