

## ‘THEY SHOULD TRY TO FIND OUT WHAT THE CHILDREN LIKE’: EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

CHRISTINE STEPHEN, PETER COPE, IDDO OBERSKI AND PETER SHAND

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of an exploratory study of the perspectives children and teachers hold about the learning experiences and pedagogical activities which engage primary and secondary school learners. The investigation was prompted by the apparent contrast between the enthusiastic, self-initiated engagement observed in preschool playrooms and the efforts teachers report as necessary to engage older pupils. A review of our interrogation of the literature on disposition to learn and motivation is followed by a description of our empirical work to explore the ways in which the main actors in classrooms make sense of engagement in learning. Our findings suggest that for the children engagement stems from active involvement, enhanced by a perception that there is some scope for freedom of action and opportunity for choice. On the other hand, the perspectives of the teachers were focused on participation in learning activities selected and led by the teacher and carried out in a way which meets the adults’ expectations.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on an exploratory study of modest proportions conducted as part of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS), a research and capacity building programme involving universities across Scotland. As teachers in Scotland begin to implement the newly developed Curriculum for Excellence for all children from 3 to 18 years old (Scottish Executive 2004), with the opportunities which this brings for doing things differently, it is timely to consider how the pedagogical activities and learning environment of the classroom can enhance or inhibit children’s engagement in learning.

The aim of the study was to investigate the perspectives held by children and teachers about the learning opportunities and pedagogical activities and interactions experienced in the first year of primary school (P1) and the first year of secondary school (S1). Our inquiry was prompted by the contrast between the enthusiasm and self-initiated engagement of young learners in preschool playrooms and the efforts reported by school teachers as necessary to maintain a high level of involvement in classroom learning among older pupils. Are we to conclude that engagement with learning decreases with age for some (or indeed for many) children or do the changing circumstances under which they are invited to learn e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management shape the learners’ reactions?

If we are to judge from the volume of research literature or the apparent salience of the concept to education professionals, then engagement or motivation has a central role in thinking about learning. We set out to explore what engagement means for the key actors in classrooms at two stages of education in Scotland. However, it is important to be clear that this study makes no claims to measure ‘what works’ and seeks to avoid privileging the perspectives of either learners or teachers. Before embarking on empirical work the research team turned to the literature. We summarise the findings of our review of the literature below before giving an account of our empirical work with children and adults and discussing the evidence gathered.

## INTERROGATING THE LITERATURE

Our literature search was wide ranging and drew on studies about dispositions to learn, motivation to learn and engagement in school from the fields of education, psychology and sociology. However, like Dörnyei (1998), we have been drawn to conclude that it is the confusing abundance, rather than the absence, of theories and empirical studies that results in questions about motivation to learn remaining unanswered. The plethora of conceptual labels employed in studies about children's involvement in formal educational endeavours may be testimony to an enduring interest on the part of researchers, teachers and policy makers but does little to aid clarity.

The psychological literature is heavily dominated by attempts to identify and measure different forms of (or deficits in) motivation or disposition to engage in learning activities (e.g. Elliot 1999; Kellaghan *et al.* 1996). This reflects the traditional 'individual' paradigm of psychology and suggests a construction of motivation or willingness to engage in learning as a personal characteristic that can be measured in isolation from the contexts in which learners live and learn. Despite some voices in the field calling for a more contextualised understanding of motivation theories of learning, Urdan and Turner (2005) concluded that this body of literature offers little convincing evidence on which to base learning and teaching practice because the studies were not usually carried out in *classrooms*.

A full understanding of the nature of competence motivation in *classrooms* may need to consider additional motivational factors, including the affordances and demands specific to classrooms, and the highly social nature of classroom interactions. (original emphasis, Urdan & Turner 2005: 298)

In addition to the lack of attention to the social nature of the classroom the absence of concern with emotion in theories of motivation or disposition has been noted. Indeed, Turner *et al.* (2003) argue that emotion is central to an understanding of classroom behaviour. Ingleton (1999) suggests that pride and shame are key emotions in learning while Trevarthen (2001) argues that the emotions of pride and shame are fundamental to children's experiences in any relationship or context. The role of the teacher in shaping dispositions, the 'affordances' of activities and the implications of success, failure and perceived competence for dispositions are all factors suggested as contributing to any individual's disposition to learn and are areas ready for further empirical study.

Those who approach this topic from the perspective of educational research typically refer to 'disposition to learn' rather than 'motivation' but the relationship between these two concepts is unclear. Indeed, much of the literature around disposition to learn and engagement in learning is concerned with questions of definition. Katz (1988) refers to disposition as a 'habit of thought or tendencies to respond to certain situations in certain ways'. She goes on to argue that they can be learned primarily from being around people who exhibit them, suggesting a construct that is dynamic and malleable rather than a static and enduring personality characteristic. In a challenge to what she describes as a 'somewhat romanticised view of children's learning' Katz (2002) suggests that not all dispositions are positive and that some dispositions can get in the way of learning, e.g. impulsivity and closed-mindedness.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) offer a three-part definition of what they describe as the 'concept of school engagement', that is, behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. They go on to argue that research on school engagement has not yet fulfilled its potential to illuminate the experiences of learners and to suggest that this will require research that explores more extensively the ways in which learners behave, feel and think. According to Harlen and Crick (2003) children's engagement in learning is indicated by a trio of characteristics; notions of self as a learner, energy put into the task and

perceived capacity to undertake the task. An alternative list is offered by Carr and Claxton (2002) who focus on resilience, playfulness and reciprocity as dispositions particularly related to learning.

In his response to Carr and Claxton, Frank Coffield (2002) argues that there are many other 'lists' of dispositions and that 'most commentators who have studied 'learning to learn' have produced their own list.'. For example Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified dispositions to think, to persist in tasks, to give opinions, contribute ideas and to work collaboratively while Candy *et al* (1994) are concerned with an inquiring mind, helicopter vision, information literacy, sense of personal agency, repertoire of learning skills. Coffield goes on to point out that lists change over time too, noting that in 1999 Claxton was writing about resilience, resourcefulness and reflectiveness.

Approaching dispositions to learn from a more sociological perspective leads to consideration of habitus. If habitus is a 'system of dispositions to a certain practice' and if the 'effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances' (Bourdieu, quoted in Reay 2004) then we are drawn to consider how learners acquire their particular habitus, question the influence of family and cultural capital on learning dispositions and explore conflicts between the habitus that children develop at home and that valued in more formal learning situations. The habitus of the peer culture is pertinent here too as illustrated in Noyes's (2004) study of the influence of school, family and peer group when children transfer from primary to secondary school. Questions about structure and children's agency become important in this construction of dispositions. In a review essay Hughes (2004) argues for a new social theory of learning that recognises children's agency and the influence of structure (e.g. in the form of gender, nation or class). Claxton and Carr (2004) also point to the influence of structure in their description of learning environments as prohibiting, affording, inviting or potentiating.

Our review left us with no clear conceptual picture or answers to our questions about the ways in which children are motivated to learn or to engage in the pedagogical activities presented in the typical classroom situation. Much of the evidence is located in specific research paradigms that do not relate readily to the highly contingent nature of classrooms and pupils' experiences. On the other hand, approaches that attempt to get closer to everyday school experiences encounter the complexity and range of interpretations that arise when exploring aspects of learning that are inherently situated. Nevertheless, the experience of teachers, children and parents is that some learning experiences are more engaging than others and that some children disengage from formal education long before the end of their school careers.

Given the inconclusive debate about the concept of disposition to learn or engagement in learning that the literature reveals and the remit of AERS to make a contribution to educational experiences in Scotland, we decided to focus on the ways in which the main actors in Scottish classrooms make sense of engagement in learning. Our aim was to explore the ways in which learners and teachers conceptualise and operationalise engagement, that is, the ways in which they talk and think about it, recognise and act upon it in everyday classroom actions and experiences. Two research questions shaped this exploratory study

- (i) In what ways is engagement understood by learners and teachers?
- (ii) What contextual factors facilitate or inhibit engagement from the perspectives of the adults and children who share classroom experiences?

We chose to explore engagement in learning as children begin primary school (aged between 4 years 6 months and 5 years 6 months) and secondary school (aged between 11 years 6 months and 12 years 6 months). We selected these years as crucial periods when children are challenged to become engaged in a new school culture and ethos, experience new or modified pedagogical approaches, changes in the nature of the relationships between adults and children and, in the case of the move to primary school, a new curriculum (Stephen & Cope 2003). (1)

## METHODS

This study was planned to be small-scale and exploratory. Our intention was to carry out an initial investigation of the perspectives on engagement in learning held by children and teachers. The project had the additional aim of building the capacity of inexperienced researchers by introducing them to the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Data was collected during 2006.

Our sampling decisions were influenced in part by ease of access. We selected three secondary schools and one feeder primary associated with each secondary school. Two of the secondary/primary clusters were local authority (LA) schools offering the mainstream 5-14 curriculum. The third cluster consisted of the junior and senior years of an independent school which followed an alternative curriculum. The independent school was located in a city in the central belt. One of the LA clusters was in north east Scotland and the other in a central belt town. The north-east LA cluster was in an area of relative socio-economic advantage while the other received children from a mixed area with a high proportion of socio-economic disadvantage.

At each secondary school we focused on one first year class and included up to five subject teachers who taught the whole class. The precise subject selection was partly dictated by the arrangements for grouping children that operated in each school but was arranged to include English, Mathematics and a modern foreign language at each location. At two of the primary schools one P1 class participated but at the primary setting in the north east we included both P1 classes taught in a shared space.

Two forms of interview were completed with the secondary and primary school teachers (14 secondary and 4 primary teachers). The first was a semi-structured interview exploring the teacher's view of the characteristics of the class concerned and his/her thinking about engagement. The second was a brief interview gathering the teacher's view on aspects of engagement and disengagement in a particular lesson (or part-day session for P1) which the interviewer had observed (Brown & McIntyre 1993).

Secondary school pupils (32 participants) were invited to talk to the researchers in a separate space in groups of two to four children. Primary and secondary teachers were asked to help the researchers identify small groups of children who would be comfortable participating together. We began the discussions with secondary school children by explaining that we were interested in what 'turns you on and turns you off' in class and the questions and discussions prompts were used flexibly. The children in P1 (33 participants) were invited to tell the researcher what it was like in their class and to take part in three 'tasks', all of which used props and ways of articulating views which were familiar to five- to six-year olds (Stephen *et al.* 2008). Using charts labelled with happy and sad faces the children were asked to contribute ideas about what they liked or disliked about school. They could respond by drawing or writing on the charts or by asking the researcher to act as a scribe. The second task involved the children 'talking to teddy' about being in class and learning to read and count. In the final activity the group were asked to sort cards depicting aspects of learning activities, of play and the social life of school into 'good day'/bad day' piles.

Before the interviews began we secured the informed consent of each teacher for observations in the classroom and the audio-recording of interviews. We sought written consent from parents and children in each class involved and took care to write the consent forms in appropriate language, for instance using smiley faces or sad faces to indicate assent or dissent for P1 learners. For the youngest children we asked parents to read the consent form and leaflet to their child and help them complete the form if necessary. Only when both parent and child consented did we ask the child to participate in the audio-recorded small group discussions.

Working from the audio files our conversations with teachers and secondary school pupils were reproduced as extended commentaries and subject to content

analysis. The youngest children’s verbal responses, their drawings and writing on charts and the results of the card sort task were also analysed for content, noting the kind of activities that provoked positive and negative affect.

## FINDINGS

### Teachers’ perspectives on engagement in learning

One source of evidence about how teachers view children’s engagement in learning comes from the signs that they use to make judgements about the extent to which children are engaged. Both primary and secondary school teachers talked about using signs to make judgements about children’s level of engagement in learning that suggested that they considered evidence of participation in the adults’ agenda for classroom activity as the basis for their evaluations. Teachers judged children to be engaged in learning when they were looking at, talking to or listening to the adult, working on a task given to them by the adult or behaving in ways that suggested that they are keen to participate in the planned activity and understood what was expected of them. Similarly, physical behaviour, body language and direction of gaze all gave clues to teachers that children were disengaged and not participating as they expected. Behavioural signs of ‘keenness’ and being focused on the task were both interpreted as indicating a willingness to do what the teacher asked or to be involved in dialogue the teacher wished to initiate. The commonly reported signs are set out in Table 1 with examples taken from teacher interviews.

Signs of engagement	Examples (from teacher interviews)
Body language	Facing the front, eyes wide open...hands are put straight up rather than being slouched in their seats. Looking at you rather than fidgeting in their seat or turning round. Looking at [teacher], looking like they are thinking about the work, not looking puzzled. [Re disengagement] They look shut off. Can see those who are happy to sit and listen, it is in their whole response [to the teacher].
Eye contact	[Re disengagement] not having eye contact with [teacher] or the person speaking. . It’s an eye contact thing.
Being on task	Being on task, having ideas, plenty to write, participating if [the teacher] is asking for responses. Less inclined to volunteer [I] take this as a sign that we they have lost the impetus of the discussion. .
Asking pertinent questions	Pupils who are engaged in it will, if they are stuck, get their hands up and get you to come and help them. You get good feedback if the class is listening and you [get] good sensible responses.
Task related group talk	[there is] an alertness about them and they are talking about what they are doing and doing what you want them to be doing. When they are working in groups you can make judgements by listening to what they are saying

**Table 1 Signs of engagement used by teachers**

Two aspects of this evidence are striking. The first is the degree to which teachers rely on body language to make relatively high level inferences about the nature of children’s participation in pedagogical activities. While the use of body language clues (and some verbal clues) might be expected given the interpersonal nature of pedagogical interactions it is interesting that teachers did not talk about attempts to verify their judgements either through explicit questioning or indicators of learning such as changes in understanding or the application of new knowledge. Their responses suggest more concern with evaluating the ways in which the children are

carrying out the tasks or the intensity of their work than their connection with the substantive content. The second striking feature is the dominance of descriptions of engagement in learning that put the teacher at the centre of the learning experience e.g. children were judged to be engaged when they were looking at the teacher.

#### Pedagogical actions and interactions to support engagement

Additional evidence about the teacher's perspective on engagement comes from their responses when asked about the actions they took to support children's engagement in learning. The range of actions identified is presented in Table 2.

Pedagogical action or activity	Examples (from teacher interviews)
Games, quizzes	Presenting it as a puzzle. They enjoy competitive work, quizzes, even spelling tests. [Present it] as something useful in context. Pairs game [gives] more enjoyment for the pupils.
Using relevant context or examples	Some times touch on PSE issues and more generally try to get relevant. We will come back to football and how the Scottish team went to the 2002 world cup . . . and they quite liked that.
Varying methods and resources	Not all reception mode, [use] group work. Start the lesson with an interactive PowerPoint presentation with pupils coming out to the front and being more interactive. Aims to have as much variety in techniques and teaching styles as possible. Get some fairly heavy algebra; we also do quite a lot of construction, some artistic work, a little bit of creative writing.
Verbal/visual presentations/interactions	Played a video [about fair trade] . . . had a board game ready but after the 20 minute video the discussion lasted for the rest of the period. William Wallace and Robert the Bruce – and they like the story telling aspect of that.
Targets, rewards & punishments	Use negotiated targets a lot to motivate children. You try and chivvy them along. Telling them to get on with the job so that when it is finished they can go to choosing. Children get rewarded for good work with points on their house chart and towards star pupil awards.
Craft work, using alternative media	Made scrolls after a unit on rights. Craft work, depicting things in different ways.
'Managing conversations'	They love discussions. Let them voice their opinion. We can go off at a tangent. Take the opposite point of view to a child's and get him or her to back it up.
Modelling	I'll say to them if I show you how to do one, you try to do this one for me.
Task supervision	Try to get them back on task with instructions on what they should be doing or trying to find out where pupils are having problems. If not engaged appropriately on a task [will] draw their attention back by physical presence, a look or calling their name.
Physical activity	In the game it helps for them to go up and down – standing up and moving about helps. Including active things helps with stimulating . . . being allowed to get up to get resources worked with [the class]. Many of them like the practical work.

**Table 2 Pedagogical activity to engage children**

Generating interest is at the core of these actions. One of the primary school teachers described her role as being to make her classroom as exciting and interesting as possible, drawing on a wide repertoire of techniques and being 'all singing, all dancing'. Secondary school teachers' talked mainly about their efforts to capture children's interest through attention to the nature of the task and the modes of response that tasks afforded. Indeed, some teachers argued that designing activities that were attractive because of their competitive or active nature was a critical part of the teacher's role.

The teacher's role is trying to present a lesson in a way that is attractive to the children and will mean something to them- perhaps presenting it as a puzzle or something useful in context. (Secondary Teacher E)

They like doing group work, like moving about, don't like sitting still for long so long so they like things like carousel work, activities that involve craft work, depicting things in different ways. They enjoy competitive work, quizzes, even spelling tests because they want to do well. (Secondary Teacher J)

Teachers did acknowledge individual differences, recognising that some children have a sustained interest in a particular topic or kind of activity. For instance, a primary school teacher described a child who was not interested or ready to engage with classroom work such as that connected with mathematics but who was 'totally enthusiastic, participating, excited' in music lessons because 'she loves to sing'. However, more typically teachers in primary and secondary schools set out to capture or generate interest through activities that gave the children opportunities for action and talk e.g. discussion following a video, craft activities, writing on the board or electronic white board, playing games, actions associated with phonics, making posters. One teacher referred to deliberately drawing attention to what he described as the 'disgusting, gross or gory' as a way of 'hooking' children into discussions around a topic. Secondary school teachers argued that making the topics 'relevant' or contextualising the subject matter in terms that were familiar to the learners raised interest but carrying out sustained writing tasks or learning something for which the children could see no purpose was likely to remove interest.

We're doing probability which I've sold to them under the guise of calling it gambling, so it is a three week course in gambling. (Secondary Teacher S)

Can be surprising how interested the children can be in principles... they have an innate sense of justice... They are far more willing to engage with the course if it is put over through the values issues. (Secondary Teacher D)

But generating interest was not considered to be the end point for the secondary school teachers who saw interest as an essentially passive state, though welcome as a 'starter' condition. They wanted to move children beyond interest to the kind of cognitive engagement with learning which they saw as more responsive and task orientated, albeit that requiring children to participate in writing tasks or complete assessments ran the risk of destroying the interest carefully nurtured.

I suppose being interested that could be purely a passive stage whereas being engaged they have got to be actively doing something. (Secondary Teacher K)

If you are engaged then to me that means you are working on something that may not interest you but you are physically working on it, trying. (Secondary Teacher J)

If they've got something themselves to read through then they are actually engaged in learning because they are reading for themselves and then having to answer the questions. (Secondary Teacher A)

#### CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

The conversations with children in P1 and S1 suggest a different perspective on the experience of learning and being in school, one which focuses on the nature of the pedagogical activities as the source of engagement and pleasure in themselves, regardless of any adult agenda. The pupils' perspective gives teachers a much less central place than the responses from the adults suggest and seems to indicate

only incidental interest in subject content. In addition, there is less about personal relationships with teachers than the comments of staff about their desire to nurture rapport or relate to children's personal circumstances would suggest.

Classroom activities given positive evaluations	% of total positive responses	Classroom activities given negative evaluations	% of total negative responses
General mentions about playing or playtime	19%	Behaviour of other children e.g. teasing, being naughty	23%
Using specific classroom resources or activities e.g. construction, sand, computer	19%	Specific adult directed activities e.g. language, sums	17%
Imaginary play	17%	Aspects of playtime or lunchtime e.g. outside when cold	10%
Creative or manipulative activities	12%	Mentions of specific classroom resources e.g.	10%
Being with friends	9%	Aspects of own behaviour e.g. when get into trouble	8%
Outside play or fun	6%		

**Table 3 Primary school children's positive and negative evaluations of school experiences (2).**

A notable feature of the data from primary 1 classes is the children's preference for activities they consider play, especially imaginative play and play with resources such as sand, construction or the computer. Of course, many of the classroom activities which the children perceive as play were designed by the teacher to offer structured learning opportunities which were not necessarily evident to the child. Nevertheless, the child's preference is typically for choosing which resource to play with and deciding what to do with the materials, props and authentic or imaginary context suggested. On the other hand, clearly adult-led, de-contextualised activities such as 'sums' appeared four times more often in the list of things that children disliked about school than the features they enjoyed (see Table 3).

This study was not able to explore the extent to which children were engaged by play activities because they related to existing interests, authentic contexts (e.g. making a card for mum) or imaginary settings which made sense to them (e.g. house play, travel agents, hospitals). However, what was clear (and could be considered surprising) was that aspects of learning in P1 (such as reading and mathematics) which are dominant and important features for adults were not mentioned by children as engaging and enjoyable.

When asked about how they learned to read or count there were some mentions of the teacher as a provider of resources ('She puts letters on the board to help us'), or a helper ('She helps you when you get mixed up with words') but again the emphasis in the children's accounts was on independent activity ('need to sound out your words', 'you need to get some cubes and when you are doing your number work you see what it adds up to'). While the teacher did not appear to be important in the primary children's perspective on school their friends and peers were influential (although still only a modest proportion of the features mentioned). The actions of friends sometimes enhanced the children's experiences but the impact of the behaviour of others was more often associated with negative feelings about being in school. For instance, children suggested that they would be sad 'when people grab things from me', 'when friends hurt me' or by 'persons being horrible'. But activities such as drawing, having golden time, playtime and playing with construction were more typical of responses when asked about what made them feel happy.

For secondary school children too time spent with friends was an important (and in this case positive) feature of their perspective on school. They were most engaged

by time spent in action and practical work in lessons such as Physical Education, Art and Design and Home Economics. While not play as experienced by the P1 children, these subjects do give children clear links to authentic experiences, involve being physically active and it can be argued that they offer more (apparent) opportunities for children to exert control over space, time and pace.

I was looking forward to PE because I'm good at swimming and wanted to go in the pool. (Girl Group 4)

[comparing Science at primary school and secondary school] And when we did science [at primary] we just had books – didn't get to do things like using Bunsen burners so now we understand it better because we are doing it. (Girl Group 4)

A comment from one child that he had 'gone off' design and technology as it had got more complicated and when they made 'things you wouldn't want' (e.g. a box that was 'too small to hold anything') suggests how engagement can drop when authenticity declines. Discussing the best way to learn French one boy suggested that this should include 'saying something that you would want to say'. The group went on to explain that they had been more engaged in French in primary school when they had learned about the country whose language they were acquiring, tasted food and looked at photographs in contrast to secondary school where 'you only learn the language'.

Secondary school children enjoyed having space for independent actions and adopting a pace that suits individuals.

It was alright because you got to work at your own pace... (Girl Group 5)

When the teacher just talks for ever and ever and we already know all this stuff... When one person doesn't listen and [the teacher] asks questions and then repeats it all over again – and I think I just want to get out of here. (Girl Group 4)

[Teachers should] explain things a little and if people put up their hands explain it a bit more (Boy Group 2)

Lunch time was seen as an opportunity not only to have a break from writing but to '[get] your own independence' and for 'hanging around' with friends. The almost universal dislike of 'too much writing' may relate to classroom activities which the children see as prescriptive and demanding. Yet it was just this act of writing that many teachers saw as critical to engagement in learning. Discussing how learning could be enhanced one child at secondary school suggested that teachers should 'make it fun stuff not like as much writing and reading' (Boy Group 6).

## DISCUSSION

What then does this preliminary exploration of the perspectives of children and adults on engagement in learning suggest in terms of classroom experiences and practices and future research questions? The secondary school children's enthusiasm for subjects such as PE, Home Economics and Technical Studies suggests that for them engagement in learning stems from active, physical involvement, possibly accompanied by a perceived degree of freedom or 'space' or a sense of achievement of an end product or evident progress. The primary school children are engaged by classroom activities they perceive as play. While they, like the secondary school children, participate in the learning activities designed by the teacher it is play and activities with friends both inside the classroom and during breaks that they enjoy and will seek out. On the other hand, teachers saw engagement in learning as children participating in the educational activities which the adult has selected and

in the way in which the adult prefers. While the teachers expect and are willing to provide more activities such as games, discussions, craft work, etc., they see these as 'hooks' to draw the children in to the subject content rather than as primary learning opportunities. Their judgement about the level of engagement seems to depend on the nature of the learner's participation in classroom experiences where the teacher is central to the activity. (Perhaps reflecting a view that learning depends on or is the result of 'direct' teaching.)

Our first research question asked how children and teachers understand engagement in learning. The evidence gathered in this study suggests that adults and children construct engagement in learning as contingent, varying with pedagogical activities and interactions rather than the enduring personal characteristic typical of psychological approaches to engagement and motivation. The behavioural, cognitive and emotional elements of engagement in learning identified by Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) are present in our data but adults and children put the emphasis on different aspects of the construct.

For the children engagement seems to derive from activities that give pleasure, choice or a degree of 'freedom' and authenticity, and are associated with positive social and emotional outcomes. The teachers' understand engagement in learning in terms of behaviour (participation in the adult agenda as evidenced by verbal and non-verbal behaviour) and cognitive activity such as purposeful writing and answering questions. The teachers' perspectives can be characterised as being epistemic in orientation, with a concern for the 'energy put into the task' element identified by Harlen and Crick (2003). In contrast, the children's perspectives can be seen as ludic, reflecting the playfulness which was part of the mix of dispositions towards learning listed by Carr and Caxton (2002).

The second research question was concerned with the children's and teachers' views on the contextual factors facilitating or inhibiting engagement. As he develops his ideas about dialogic pedagogy Skidmore (2006) argues for the importance of the affective conditions for learning. He suggests that learning is enhanced when the teacher is perceived as a 'concerned other, available to guide and coach the learner' and when learners experience mutual engagement and a sense of personal growth. Claxton and Carr (2004) claim that a learning environment that is experienced as 'affording, inviting or potentiating' provides the conditions for robust learning.

There was little in the children's data described here to that suggested that they experienced teachers as mutually engaged partners in learning. While the primary school children did not comment explicitly on a lack of equity in terms of power some expressed a dislike of adult imposed tasks. Activities where they were constrained in the way in which they used the resources or in terms of expected outcomes were construed as 'work' and less engaging or enjoyable. On the other hand activities that offered scope for making choices and that received largely distal supervision were positively evaluated as play. Secondary school pupils expressed frustration at their lack of control over the pace of lessons and of being constrained either to listen to an explanation they found unnecessary or by having to wait for attention.

In contrast, the teachers' responses in the initial and post-lesson interviews were peppered with comments about their desire for children to adopt their expectations about classroom behaviour and work patterns. Even those who offered the most positive evaluations of the children in the target classes referred to the adult imposed rules and their efforts to ensure that children did not over-step 'the line'. The teachers had clear agendas for their classes which were not negotiable with children (regardless of a teacher's desire to relate to individual pupils). They were aware of the need to engage children in learning in the classroom but it was learning that was adult prescribed and engagement that was adult evaluated.

Although they reported trying to make connections to children's possible future selves or current 'out of school' selves the secondary school teachers were very aware that it was often difficult for children to see any use for classroom learning

e.g. speaking French. The secondary children seemed to see school mainly in terms of imposed lessons rather than opportunities to achieve personal growth or ambition. Although they were aware of having learned things while in S1 (e.g. being able to say more things in French, knowing how to cook new things) and acquiring or improving skills (e.g. playing the recorder, diving), they did not talk in the interviews of any connection between this and their aspirations for the future or their life outside school. And they did not see school as the only place to learn and talked about learning things like football, ice-skating and snooker out of school.

When asked about learning inside and outside school one boy responded  
I think you are supposed to learn more in school but you dinnae really. (Boy Group 3)

Thinking about connections between school experiences and future selves is difficult for five and six year olds who are still developing metacognition and whose understanding can be expected to be tied to present perceptions. Nevertheless, they expressed little interest in developing as readers or in handling number but appeared to view these activities as the work that interrupted play.

The younger children were eager to please the teacher and glad to be rewarded when they did so but there was no evidence that they expected the teacher to be similarly keen to please them. However, secondary school children were much more aware of the value of ensuring mutual engagement. They wanted a chance to have their say, to learn through games and doing things they wanted to do. They talked of the need to involve every child and build lessons around what children like. As one girl explained

They should try to find out what the children like and try to form a lesson around that . . . If you get to be part of what you are learning you will understand more. (Girl Group 4)

In the light of this evidence then it appears that classroom conditions may not be optimum for the support of engagement in learning, at least from the perspective of children in the first year of secondary school in Scotland.

At the beginning of this exploratory study we posed a question about whether engagement in learning declines with age or reflects the curriculum and pedagogy the learners are experiencing. The evidence we have gathered suggests that as school careers progress the gap widens between learning experiences that engage children and teachers' expectations about engagement in learning. If children are willing to participate in learning in order to achieve longer term goals that transcend their present lack of immediate engagement (as some clearly were), or because of a desire to succeed at whatever they do, then their educational career can be sustained. However, without these personal characteristics progressive disengagement seems likely.

Scottish education is about to undergo a period of change and reformulation with the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence and the already increased attention to assessment as a form of support for learning. Several features of the design of the Curriculum for Excellence seem well suited to supporting engagement with learning as the children view it, for example, increased opportunities for making choices and ensuring that children see the value of what they are learning. In this context it seems important to explore further the nature of engagement as seen by children and teachers and to explore the facilitating influence of the emerging curriculum. We have begun this process with a project investigating children's experiences of learning in P1 classrooms that are adopting an avowedly active approach to learning in an attempt to engage children at the beginning of their school careers. However, there is much more to explore, for example, considering what the children see as valuable and of relevance to their possible selves, teachers' views on the ways in which choice can be offered in classrooms and quantitative and qualitative evaluations of levels of engagement and learning outcomes in classrooms that experiment with alternative strategies to enhance engagement in learning.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Until 2007 there were two sets of curriculum guidance in Scotland, the first covering the years 3-5 and the second crossing primary and the first two years of secondary school from 5-14 years).
- <sup>2</sup> Data is pooled across locations and from all three activities. Only aspects of environment mentioned in 5% or more of the total number of positive or negative responses are included in this table.

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