

Attitude, Motivation and Agency: the three pillars of transformational teaching for at-risk students.

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Abstract

Student engagement is a paramount teaching challenge – successfully addressed, it has implications in wide classroom management issues. Since statistics show that 20 to 30% of secondary school students have diagnosed or undiagnosed learning or communicative disabilities, refining methods of engaging these students is a critical matter for teachers already juggling between time and curriculum pressures.

This Case Study describes how an at risk student engaged through visual media in a mainstream class and how this engagement in turn opened a keyhole to develop his previously underused verbal and social competencies. Central to this process was how the student's passion was revealed and tapped into via teaching objectives. Developing the key competencies described in the NZ Curriculum, teachers reported that benefits accrued by the student spread class-wide in unpredicted ways for instance by the student being recognised for leadership qualities and becoming a role model for his peers.

Some students may never experience success in a formal framework – yet the education framework offers unmatched opportunities for targeting and following up interventions. Raising student engagement is important at all ages, however lest students engage around Intermediate level, drop out risks increase dramatically. This article describes how via the arts curriculum a student operated a transformation from disengagement to leadership through the following stages: 1. Identification of unique opportunities to intervene; 2. Strategy implementation and 3. Outcome evaluation. For each of these sections an example and the subsequent benefit to the student, teachers and family are presented.

Identify the Passion

At what point does a teacher decide that a student needs special attention? At what point does one interpret a difficulty as a symptom not as the cause of the trouble itself? The factor at work here is **attitude**. On the part of the educator this translates as willingness to be vigilant to fluctuations in students' performance, whichever way these may manifest. It is the attitude that supports the readiness to engage in the change territory. This a complex issue and there often are multiple factors to consider because situations can easily bellow into bigger issues that seem insoluble in the school setting.

The student's attitude served as a first indication. Amidst signs of disengagement and some disruptive behaviours, teachers noticed an atypical change in his attitude during art classes: The student was using art to express some of his emotions and interest in nature and environmental topics. In the process, the student also found out that not only he was on level playing field with peers but that he could outperform them on certain indicators: he could finish his class assignments faster than them. This first time experience of being ahead of the class built on a natural competitive streak which had previously been misused in activities such as entering consumer competitions for cash prizes.

From the teacher's point of view, identifying the student's passion was the turning point around which the change hinged. Working in an area we are passionate about is always more enjoyable and empowering – but in the case of a disabled or different student, uncovering what drives a

student is vital for the following intervention stage. The passion is what will keep the student learning and allow the teacher to move away from disciplining to guiding and facilitating – the process is one of observation backed up by the willingness to go beyond the call of duty.

To the parent, failure of their child is often a disempowering experience – they may feel uncertain about the future with each negative incident adding to their fears. Typically at-risk students suffer self-esteem damage and disengage from school. Many parents feel in some kind of downward spiral – and loose faith in a productive future for their child. They often compare this situation with that of their other children:

“with my other children, I knew of course that they’d encounter challenges, but had general confidence that things sort themselves out in the end – with this one the situation could tip over anytime into a black hole; I felt a loss of control with possible negative consequences”

Keyhole Intervention

What will help be your key ally after taking the decision to intervene? The important factor here is the **motivation** of all parties: the student’s motivation will fuel ongoing change and the teacher’s motivation will supply the energy required to see through these increases in achievements. Interventions need to rest on the student’s genuine curiosity for his field of interest: in this Case Study, the student was motivated by his new found ability to be better at one thing than his peers – he could produce more art than the non-disabled students. This new burst of activity made a significant difference to the student who found it easy to engage in work tailored around his curiosity – art and caring about the environment. The student’s genuine feelings for his chosen topic formed the ‘keyhole’ through which everything got taught: English to write a portfolio catalogue, interaction to write emails to galleries, software to organise the logistics of an exhibition, spreadsheet to calculate sales and costs, for instance. Incidentally, this is congruent with the New Zealand Ministry of Education promotion of reflective inquiry methodology with a student-centered approach at its core. With the initial energy boost of early achievements, came also the desire to outperform in quality and this gave the student impetus to put in extra time into his art work. Additionally, the student encountered his first externally validated success as the youngest artist selected as finalist in two of the most prestigious art awards in the country in that year.

From the teachers’ perspective, there was firstly the recognition that they wanted to transcend the routine of ‘teaching to the test’ which is a trap that teachers often report finding themselves in. Once teaching objectives were tailored around the student’s passion, there were plenty institutionalised elements in place to help: Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for instance are possible vehicles for implementing the strategy to back up such planned interventions. Assistive technologies can help students overcome specific disabilities to interact using words and images and build their future professional life. Not only finding an outlet for success was gratifying but a novel situation developed in the class – the student started displaying leadership capabilities. This had unexpected results of other students’ performance somewhat improving – they did not want to be left behind whilst a student previously perceived as disabled now outdid them. This was a welcome motivational injection into class dynamics.

Parents at first surprised that art could engage their child, noticed the change in attitude when he first got out of bed with a temperature demanding to go to school to avoid missing art class! They describe seeing a first glimpse of hope when their child was able to perform in a mainstream class and moreover gained some acceptance from teachers and peers alike. It is important to stress here that art and painting was not in any way on the student’s ‘radar’ in either interest or performance. However as the saying goes “success breeds success” - with his first recognition came appetite for more and a process was put in motion that was going to bring the student to international recognition. Family members engaged in reinforcing at home the processes that were happening at school in close communication with teachers. Helping a child develop his career from this point on requires significant involvement from parents:

“You cannot let go and hope things will sort themselves out. You have to decide early on whether you’d rather invest “forward” (in supporting the actions leading to success – in this case help organise exhibitions, coach student in publishing catalogues or advocate for his rights) or “backwards” (extinguish fires from undesirable behaviour borne out of boredom)”

Expect ‘Extra’ Ordinary Outcomes

Are we expecting too little from our disabled students? How would we know we are in the right direction? The factor at work here is **agency** in evaluating the decision to take action and the results of the actions. Since the work was planned with the key competencies (Thinking, Using languages symbols and text, Managing self, Relating to others and Participating and contributing), evaluating the outcome of the intervention was done by individually assessing NCEA achievement criteria. For instance the student making art in the context of sustainability themes is considered to develop participation and social engagement. This was a particularly important set of skills for the student plagued with communicative disabilities – via art he could tell his story and be heard¹. For some students, this means that vicious cycles of disengagement are replaced by virtuous (out of ordinary) ones where successful students become role models and inspire others. Moreover developing the key competency of Participating and contributing helped this student develop his professional life by building his artistic reputation, as captured in Illustration 1.



Illustration 1: Student’s social interactions around his artwork

Teachers sometimes comment that “it is difficult to assess disabled students’ achievements with the complex NCEA requirements”. Important to note here that a shift from mainstream assessment to count the life-skills displayed in the process of developing his art career is possible via the flexible Unit Standards assessment methodology (see Appendix). This does require a certain investment on the teacher’s side in order to put together a comprehensive list of credits – as opposed to the more straightforward solution of following pre-established Achievement Standard pathways. This investment however contributed to teachers’ reporting personal satisfaction from having taught the student:

¹ Some of the above is available online on: www.y-artist.blogspot.com

“At the time I felt it was *him* changing my life not the other way – I understood so much about myself and my new direction in life through him – now I only want to help others like him”.



Illustration 2: Exhibition opening

Illustration 2 shows some of the proud educators (from primary to high school) that attended the “Visualising Climate Change” exhibition opening. This Case Study is developed in the hard copy teacher resource and book “Changing the World – One Painting at a Time” (2010). The resource is evidence-based and describes the integration of process (using digital tools) content (environmental issues) and personal reflection (becoming responsible citizens) in the work done; it was externally evaluated by Hastings (2011) who concluded that “such a fast-rising star, and one so young, is rare in the art world.”

From the parent’s perspective, the idea that a school intervention would give their child a tangible basis for a future career was life-changing. They sensed there would have been little chance of this happening once he left secondary school. Hence as the positive cycle started, they worked at reinforcing school activities from home, strengthening the vital transition to post secondary education. They helped for instance with the logistics of setting up exhibitions or negotiating contracts.

“I know the way ahead still involves us in a major way and the process of letting go here is radically different that with our other children – but with each year he gains competence. The early career start is proving very successful. We were able to support a seamless transition to higher education as during his last year in High School he acquired a Certificate in Arts and Creativity and is now graduating with a Diploma (honours) with the help of an outstanding mentor². Understanding and acting on his passion proved to be a life-line. Three years on, he has received 11 awards and scholarships and participated in over 40 national and international

² The Learning Connexion (www.tlc.ac.nz) teaches a distance programme to disabled students. Marcel Baaijens is a Distance Delivery Mentor/Tutor and Inclusion Coordinator (<http://mb-af.blogspot.com>).

exhibitions with growing success. It has been a collective journey: teachers, siblings, extended family, friends, colleagues and sometimes total strangers helped us transform this extraordinary momentum into a success story. Our mission today is to spread the story to show educators and families what is possible. You become an inspiration to other parents that the fate of their children can improve.”

Outcomes were also externally evaluated: a documentary (Mandelberg, 2011) depicts the journey of the student. It examines how he overcame fundamental communication challenges by developing a visual language. The film investigates how relationships with siblings and family contributed to his thriving artist career and how using art to connect, he communicated environmental and social messages to society as a whole. Passionate about raising awareness about climate change and in order to create the much-needed behaviour change, he painted the images people prefer to ignore, of what will happen to landscapes and houses if we cannot alter our current path – the student called this “Visualising climate change³”.

Should teachers reconsider how they choose and promote role models?

Wyn et al. (2000) noted that it is the role of schools to promote early social engagement by building on principles of learning outlined in best educational practices: students feeling in control of their learning, building competence by tackling real issues and growing connectedness with others through community linkages.

To what extent does this happen for at-risk students with disabilities? This student could have finished high school on the failure to complete NCEA. Rather a focus on art-related activities allowed him to experience success, start a career in which he will be recognised for his contribution and become a leader and role model to peers. One could argue that talent was going to surface anyways – intervention or not – but this was far from the possibilities predicted at the time. The take home message of this article is not that challenging students are necessarily potential artists. Rather, the message is that searching for the passion of a challenging student⁴ and using it as the energy to move forward rather than accept surface ‘failure’ is a valuable endeavour.

Wyn et al. (2000) provided strong arguments to reconsider the role models we bring forward to our classes however they noted that students may sometimes feel that active citizenship is a role delegated to adults and not attainable at their age. The upcoming disabled artist overcame his communicative challenges to share his passion for sustainable action with the world. Using this student’s story and book, teachers can share with their class a role model closer to their students’ age group to bridge such potential generational bias. This story tells how a disabled student enacted active citizenship by staging a protest using art to spread his political message.

What does the story of the ugly duckling teach us? ...that with a simple frame of reference change, one can step into a previously unfathomable reality. Our education system provides a wealth of diverse frames of references. Responding to this example, some teachers have said that this is the stuff they originally wanted to teach to – for many mainstream students could achieve without teachers – so the experience of changing someone’s life in such a way is life-changing for teachers too. Talent and further perseverance is of course what ensures future career success - but this talent did remain buried till discovered hence the “identification” turning point cannot be overstated. What was needed were teachers willing to take a duckling under their wing, transcend the demands of routine and take it to another family where it could burgeon – such is the essence of teacher transformational leadership.

¹ Some of the above is available online on: www.y-artist.blogspot.com

³ A trailer of the documentary can be viewed at: <http://y-artist.blogspot.com/p/digital-story.html>

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Appendix

Because of the flexibility built into the Unit Standard procedures, the student was able to achieve a large number of credits from the work being done to produce art and descriptors of the art, collaborate with relevant professionals, prepare relevant promotion materials, interview with the media about the art and generally carry out career-building actions. Some examples of such Unit Standards are included below:

Relevant Unit Standards Level 2 credits:

Be assertive in a range of specified situations
Participate in a group/team which has an objective
Participate in informal meetings
Set a personal financial goal and plan its implementation
Produce a targeted resume
Explore career options relevant to an area of learning and explore the implications for oneself
Obtain job search skills
Manage own learning programme

Relevant Unit Standards Level 3 credits:

Key in text at 35 wpm
Develop and use keyboarding skills to enter text
Sell goods and/or services in a retail or distribution environment
Interview in informal situations
Speak to a specified audience in a predictable situation
Give and respond to feedback on performance
Contribute in a group/team which has an objective
Set a complex personal financial goal and plan its implementation
Manage own career development
Serve customers in a wide variety of contexts
Apply skills and qualities of a sales person in retail and distribution environment
Employ customer service techniques for different customer behaviours
Create in store displays in a retail or distribution environment

Relevant Unit Standards Level 4 credits:

Collaborate within a group/team which has an objective
Interview in a formal situation

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