

**Tell Me With Pictures! Grade 8 Students' Digital Representations of Engagement in Learning**  
**Dites-le en images ! Des étudiants de secondaire 2 représentent l'engagement envers l'apprentissage**

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Article abstract

This article discusses what constitutes engagement in learning from the perspective of Grade 8 students. While a mixed methods approach was employed to gather quantitative and qualitative data, the focus of this article is the qualitative data collected from an interactive, participatory workshop. As part of this workshop, Grade 8 students were asked to capture moments of engagement by taking digital pictures of spaces, places, items, and activities that represented their engagement in learning. Analysis of the digital pictures revealed themes related to: interest, collaboration, inspiration/motivation, nourishment, enjoyment, discovery, and a future purpose. Each theme is discussed with supporting pictures and quotes to prompt reflection and raise critical questions from the viewpoint of learners.

# TELL ME WITH PICTURES! GRADE 8 STUDENTS' DIGITAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

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**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses what constitutes engagement in learning from the perspective of Grade 8 students. While a mixed methods approach was employed to gather quantitative and qualitative data, the focus of this article is the qualitative data collected from an interactive, participatory workshop. As part of this workshop, Grade 8 students were asked to capture moments of engagement by taking digital pictures of spaces, places, items, and activities that represented their engagement in learning. Analysis of the digital pictures revealed themes related to: interest, collaboration, inspiration / motivation, nourishment, enjoyment, discovery, and a future purpose. Each theme is discussed with supporting pictures and quotes to prompt reflection and raise critical questions from the viewpoint of learners.

## DITES-LE EN IMAGES ! DES ÉTUDIANTS DE SECONDAIRE 2 REPRÉSENTENT L'ENGAGEMENT ENVERS L'APPRENTISSAGE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article explore la manière dont des étudiants de secondaire 2 conçoivent l'engagement envers l'apprentissage. Bien qu'une variété d'approches ait été utilisée pour recueillir des données quantitatives et qualitatives, cet article se concentre sur les données qualitatives obtenues dans le cadre d'un atelier interactif et participatif. Lors de cet atelier, les étudiants devaient immortaliser des moments d'engagement en prenant des photographies numériques de lieux, objets ou activités représentant leur implication envers leur apprentissage. L'analyse de ces photographies numériques a permis de dégager certains thèmes : l'intérêt, la collaboration, l'inspiration, la motivation, l'épanouissement, le plaisir, la découverte et les objectifs futurs. Chaque thème a fait l'objet de discussions. Durant les échanges, les photographies et des citations ont été utilisées pour susciter une réflexion et soulever des questions fondamentales chez les apprenants.

**E**ngagement is generally characterized as involvement or investment in learning. However, its complex, multidimensional nature makes it difficult to define in general terms. While typically categorized into behavioural and psychological understandings, there is often a sense that there is more to what engagement looks and feels like in the classroom, in particular from the perspective of students (Scheffel, 2012, 2016). In this paper, I highlight the insights of Grade 8 students to share visual understandings of what constitutes engagement in learning. Key emergent themes suggest that engagement, through the lens of eighth grade students, relates to: interest, collaboration, inspiration / motivation, nourishment, enjoyment, discovery, and a future purpose. To set the stage for the study, I turn first to the literature exploring student voices on engagement.

### STUDENT VOICES ON ENGAGEMENT

Pflaum and Bishop (2004) used drawings and interviews to help understand middle school students' perceptions of reading engagement, specifically in relation to silent reading, oral reading, and reading strategies. Noting the ways in which students "voiced powerful and specific reactions" (p. 202) to both moments of engagement and detachment, Pflaum and Bishop (2004) suggested, "If classrooms were open to talk about how new ideas and experiences were perceived, students could learn from one another, teachers could design strategy instruction that meets student needs, and confusion and misunderstanding could be avoided" (p. 212). When they looked more closely at silent reading, Pflaum and Bishop (2004) highlighted the importance of choice, personal preference, quiet, and freedom from writing as contributors to engagement. However, the study did not consider the ways in which students understood the term *engagement*.

Parsons, Malloy, Parsons, and Burrowbridge (2015) questioned what makes instructional tasks engaging or disengaging, and used multiple measures (observations, rating scales, and interviews) to find the following qualities of engagement: authentic, collaborative, challenging, student-directed, and sustained (all of which were summarized from a literature review). Outlining 10 of the most engaging and least engaging tasks, Parsons et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of collaboration and appropriate support within the tasks identified by students. Conversely, tasks viewed as difficult with little involvement on the part of the students (e.g. worksheets) were connected with disengagement. In conclusion, Parsons et al. (2015), like Pflaum and Bishop (2004), emphasized the need for teachers to design learning tasks with these student understandings in mind.

Involving students as researchers, Carrington, Bland, Spooner-Lane, and White (2013) also recognized the valuable insights offered by Grade 8-10 students in their study of school engagement. Analyzing the quantitative findings from this student-generated research project, Carrington et al. (2013) suggested

four features that contributed to student engagement: (1) interest in learning, (2) group interaction, (3) student-teacher relationships, and (4) desire to do well at school. They concluded, “when given the opportunity, students have the capacity to undertake valid and meaningful research to make informed contributions to school improvement and student engagement from a perspective that could otherwise be overlooked” (p. 729).

In a discussion of disengagement in high school, Washor and Mojkowski (2014) offered 10 student expectations for engagement, termed “rules for engagement in a new relationship that young people want with school” (p. 8). These expectations for engagement included: relationships, relevance, choice, challenge, authenticity, application, play, practice, time, and timing. Each expectation includes a series of questions that students might ask their teachers. From their work with young people, Washor and Mojkowski (2014) emphasized the importance of looking beyond early identification of drop-outs to a closer, more in-depth look at the problem of disengagement.

Zyngier (2007) similarly warned against viewing engagement in deficit terms and strove to put student voices in the center of conversations about student engagement. Sharing his goal for privileging student voice, Zyngier (2007) wrote: “They are given the opportunity, together with their teachers, to enter into the discourse about the contrasting and sometimes conflicting views of what student engagement looks like in their classrooms” (p. 95).

My research on engagement has taken a similar approach to valuing student voices (Scheffel, 2009, 2012, 2016). The present study highlights eighth graders’ perspectives on engagement through the use of digital cameras.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is influenced by (1) liberal or student-oriented conceptions of engagement (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), (2) the work of Cambourne (1988), and (3) a previously developed *Framework for Literacy Engagement* (Scheffel, 2012). First, McMahon and Portelli (2004) outlined three major definitions of student engagement offered by educationists: conservative or traditional, liberal or student-oriented, and critical-democratic. I situate myself within the second grouping as I recognize a broader understanding of engagement that moves beyond hierarchical and narrow definitions often limited to behavioural traits and psychological dispositions. Instead, I value definitions that focus on students’ strengths rather than deficits, and view teachers as part of the learning process. While I aim for critical inquiry through “the dialectical processes between teachers and students” (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 70), a characteristic of critical-democratic definitions, I acknowledge that teachers play a key role in engaging students through strategies, style of teaching, and attitude.

Second, I look to the work of Cambourne (1988), specifically, his three guiding principles for engagement that view learners as potential doers of tasks that will further their life purposes and allow them to take supported risks. In so doing, I focus on a sociocultural approach to engagement that places learners in the forefront. Third, I draw upon a Framework for Literacy Engagement developed from a previous study with Grade 2 students at the same school, which presents four filters through which we perceive engagement: personal, term, observable visual, and internal senses (Scheffel, 2012). This framework set the foundation for this study as I sought to elaborate, clarify, and expand upon earlier findings.

## METHODOLOGY

I used a mixed methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach allowed for diversity in methods as I spoke with Grade 8 students about their engagement in learning. I began by conducting an interactive, participatory workshop with student discussions about “what is research” (e.g. confidentiality and participation) to set the stage for student’s involvement. Students then brainstormed ideas about what engagement meant to them as learners, and completed a rating scale in relation to the Framework for Literacy Engagement (Scheffel, 2012). The findings of the rating scale are discussed separately (Scheffel, 2016).

In the workshop, students were asked to consider the spaces, places, items, and activities that represented their engagement in learning. Working in small groups of 3 or 4, they were to share their answers to this question through photographs that highlighted the engaging activity. I gave them approximately 30-40 minutes to take their pictures around the school with the caveat that they not interrupt any learning that was taking place in other classrooms. I reminded students of issues related to confidentiality and asked them not to include faces of one another within the photographs. In addition, I gave each group a recording sheet on which they were to title the photograph and write a brief description as to why this image represented engagement to them.

### *The use of photographs as a research method*

The use of photographs as a research method is not new and has assumed multiple forms in qualitative research – e.g. photo novella (Wang & Burris, 1994), FotoDialogo (Ramos, 1999), photovoice (Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004), and the image exercise (Pedersen, 2008). A common underpinning of each of these methods is Freire’s understanding of dialogue as central to communication and education, as well as a process that seeks to empower: “In Freirian terms, photographs serve as one kind of ‘code’ that reflect that community back upon itself, mirroring the everyday social and political realities that influence people’s lives” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 172).

While I draw upon a similar goal of empowerment, it is not with the same degree or intensity for social change as the above methods. Instead, my goals were similar to those of Cook and Hess (2007), who selected photography when working with children for the following reasons: (1) easy and enjoyable for students, and likely to engage their interest, (2) more than just writing, (3) do not need to be an expert with cameras to take pictures, (4) supports the attention of students with learning disabilities, (5) gives students greater control and choice over what they view as important, (6) photographs represent students' interest in a tangible way, and (7) enhances reporting of the project (p. 32). In this study, the use of photography served as the stepping-stone to writing.

Photographs represent a single moment in time and in the study, are constrained by the confidentiality limitation of being unable to include faces. However, as Cook and Hess (2007) remind us, "It needs to be recognized that photographs are not an absolute representation of a given state, but a tool to help understandings develop" (p. 43). Pflaum and Bishop (2004) convey a similar understanding in relation to the use of drawings: "As objects that tell stories that are neither right nor wrong, the drawings stimulate reflection about process. The drawings and the talk around them foster reactions in which the uniqueness of each student's perceptions is honored" (p. 212). I, too, draw upon the photographs taken by participants as a tool to enhance understandings of Grade 8 students' visual representations of engagement.

### *Participants / analysis*

Participants included 72 Grade 8 students who participated in two workshops with 61 providing consent to include their photographs and written artifacts for the research (11 of these students participated in the previous study). Data sources included: brainstorming charts, rating scales, digital photographs, and written descriptions. In particular, this paper focuses on the photographs and their descriptions of engagement. The number of photographs taken by each group ranged from 3-6, reflecting students' careful thought about which images to capture in the 30-40 minutes provided.

Analysis of the data was threefold: first, involving reading / rereading and viewing / reviewing for overall understanding; second, the sorting of photographs for subject / location, followed by the coding of the written descriptions for themes or issues arising, and including points of agreement and contradiction, both in relation to previous findings and the research literature, and; third, consideration of students' suggestions for future change and possibility.



*Tell Me With Pictures!*

as shared by the students, are provided in italics with supporting statements shared in quotations. Statements have been corrected for spelling to focus on the ideas shared. Some of the photographs discussed were not included (NI) due to poor image quality or identifying elements.

**TABLE 1. Overview of photographs taken**

Learning spaces (42)		Displays / documentation (26)		Tools / nourishment for learning (8)		Working together (3)	
Gym / Sport equipment	11	Art-related	8	Computer lab / computers	3	Working with partners	2
School yard	8	Teamwork / respect	5	Television	1	Friendship	1
Library / library books	7	Goals / pledges	4	Whiteboard	1		
Music Room / music instruments	5	Motivational facts	4	Basketball net	1		
Classroom	3	Literacy-related	3	Food	1		
Science class / science experiments	2	Full-day Kindergarten documentation	2	Water	1		
Hallway	2						
School building	2						
Other	2						

*When students are interested in what they are learning about they are typically very engaged in it. (The Library, Figure 2)*



**FIGURE 2. The library**



*Interest.* As signified by the pictures, main areas of interest included physical education, music, library, science, and computers. Insights as to why these subjects stood out were revealed in pictures such as *Book Graffiti Wall* (Figure 3), which encouraged sharing of reading interests: “It shows that people are interested in reading and learning and telling others what they read.” *Science Experiments* (Figure 4) also suggested the need for tasks that piqued interests, in particular, because it was a “great hands-on activities group work that kept our focus and interest active.” The idea of active learning leading to creating engaging spaces is also revealed in pictures like *Computers* (Figure 5) and *Gym* (Figure 6), where students were provided opportunities for what they suggested was a more active involvement in learning. For example, the corresponding description for *Computers* (Figure 5) suggested, “the computers help us engage because it helps with active learning and teaches us whatever we need to find on the Internet.” Similarly, *Gym* (Figure 6) conveyed the ways in which “this room allows us to be active and get involved with others.”



FIGURE 3. *Book graffiti wall*

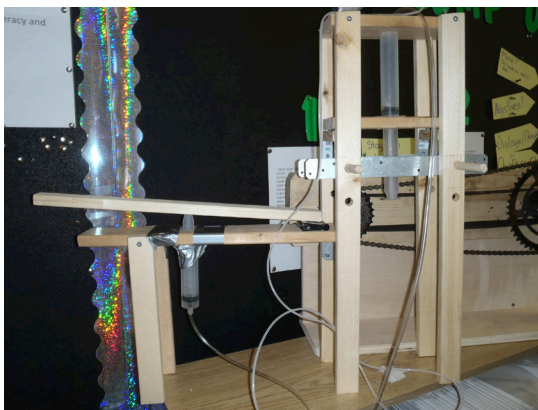


FIGURE 4. *Science experiments*



FIGURE 5. *Computers*



FIGURE 6. *Gym*

Though perhaps seemingly in contrast, spaces that allowed for quiet focus and independence were also represented by *Library* (Figure 7) and *Hallway* (NI). These photographs suggest that active does not necessarily denote outward physical movements but rather, an active thinking that can be reflected through reading and independent work as well. The photographers for *Library* (Figure 7), for example, explained: “We chose the library because it’s [a] quiet environment, allowing us to think and concentrate while we are reading.” On a related vein, *Hallway* (NI) was chosen to represent a workspace “because when everyone is in class, the hallway is quiet, which allows us to be independent, so that we can focus on our work.” Regardless of the space, interest and active involvement take on similar understandings in this theme.

FIGURE 7. *Library*

*Working together increases our engagement.*

*(Working Together, NI)*

**Collaboration.** One of the more predominant themes, the notion of working together was highlighted in 10 of the picture descriptions. Photographs of art displays, such as *Martin Luther King* (Figure 8) highlighted collaboration as part of working together to achieve an end product: “It engaged all students to draw and learn about Martin Luther King.” *Heart* (Figure 9) conveyed a similar goal in that, “There are people working together and going past their goals to complete it.” In *Music Room* (Figure 10), collaboration is reflected through the interaction required to work together as a band: “We work together as a band to make music and we have to interact and engage to make it successful.” In each example above, the goal is a shared one related to creating a successful end result.

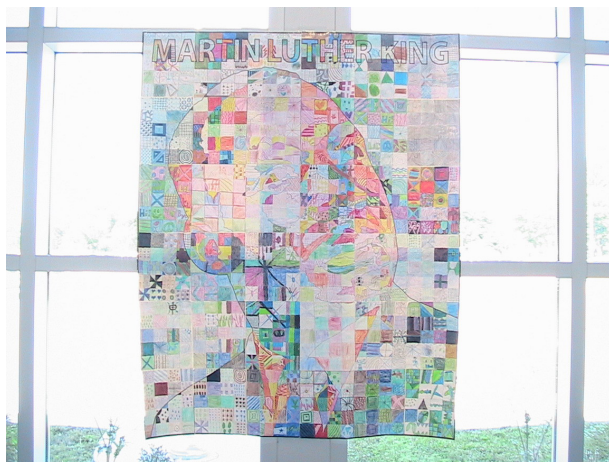
FIGURE 8. *Martin Luther King*



FIGURE 9. *Heart*



FIGURE 10. *Music room*

With *Anti-Bully Commitment* (NI) and *Pledge* (Figure 11), working together took on a larger purpose, reflecting teamwork and commitment to make a difference and strengthen school community. Explaining their rationale for *Anti-Bully Commitment* (NI), a visual of a large hand individually signed by the class, one group of students explained: “This picture represents how people work together and all agree under one thing (topic) this shows teamwork and commitment.” Similarly, the description for *Pledge* (Figure 11) emphasized, “It engages everyone to stand up to bullying and make a difference in the school community. By doing this they can put an end to bullying.”

FIGURE 11. *Pledge*

For shared tasks, the benefit of having someone to talk to and help with learning was seen to lead to greater fun in the learning process: “If we get to work in pairs we will probably work better because we have someone to help us, and also someone to make the work more fun (to talk to)” (*Working in Pairs*, NI). *Full Day Kindergarten Learning Area* (NI) reinforced this idea: “It shows examples of young learners working together, while having fun in the process.” Collaboration as part of engagement also took on a related theme of togetherness in *Team Huddle* (Figure 12) and *Kindergarten Playground* (Figure 13), where participants highlighted friendships and connections that “supported our creativity and decision-making and overall, helped us as learners.” *Kindergarten Playground* (Figure 13), in particular, included the idea of a space that provides “opportunities to make new friends and connect with others.” Perhaps reminiscent of the nostalgia these students felt as soon-to-be graduates from elementary school, this return to Kindergarten seemed to reflect spaces where the potential for engagement through collaboration first began.

FIGURE 12. *Team huddle*



FIGURE 13. Kindergarten playground

It shows us examples of good writing that we can use to improve on and to get ideas to learn from. (Wow Wicked Words, Figure 14)

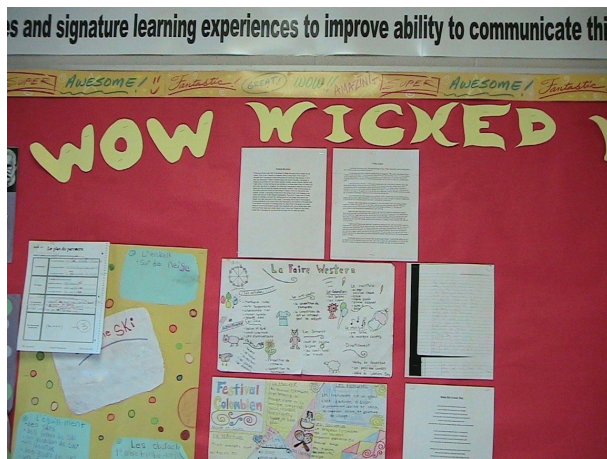


FIGURE 14. Wow wicked words

*Inspiration / Motivation.* In several of the photographs, engagement was represented through artifacts and people from whom inspiration and/or motivation could be drawn. For example, Wow Wicked Words (Figure 14), offered a space for setting writing goals: “It shows us examples of good writing that we can use to improve on and to get ideas to learn from.” *Bump Up Board* (Figure 15) conveyed a similar purpose: “It makes us want to set a goal that we can achieve in the future.” Here, examples of writing were posted on a bulletin board with suggestions for improvement in order to “bump up” to the next level of achievement.



FIGURE 15. *Bump up board*

*Olympic* (Figure 16) and *Motivational Poster* (Figure 17), on the other hand, encouraged goals related to personal accomplishments rather than academic goals. *Olympic* (Figure 16) displayed the students' goals for the year in connection with a camp they attended as a class. One group explained, "It shows engagement because it reminded us of our goals." Picking up on this idea of motivation to do your best, *Motivational Poster* (Figure 17) displayed the words "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are" by Theodore Roosevelt. The photographers elaborated, "It keep(s) you motivated and tells you to do what you can with what you have to the best of your abilities."

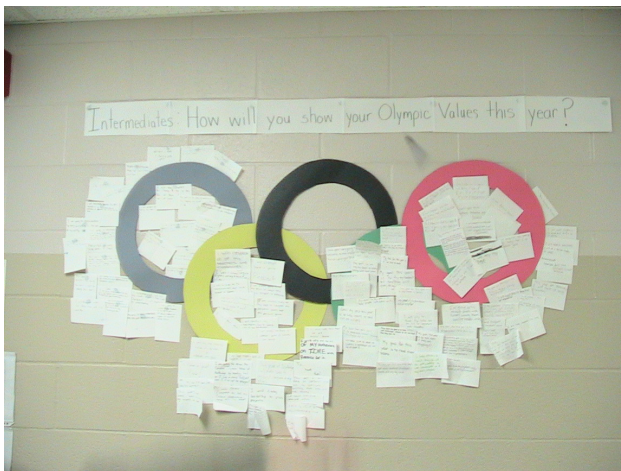


FIGURE 16. *Olympic*



FIGURE 17. *Motivational poster*

The idea of inspiration arose from pictures conveying artwork, such as *Chameleon* (Figure 18) where the explanation simply stated, “Art is inspiration. Beautiful Seeds.” In this photograph, we see four visually different chameleons sitting on branches, the uniqueness of each one standing out. The idea of engagement as related to artistic expression stands out here, along with the perceived need to engage in an artistic task in order to produce beautiful art.

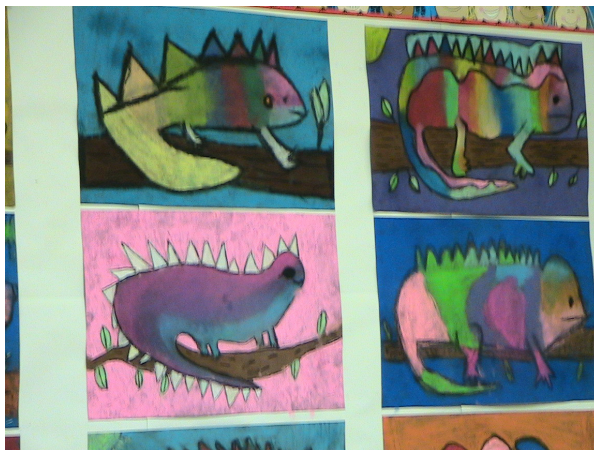


FIGURE 18. *Chameleon*

Inspiration was also noted in relation to those to who might be role models. A picture displaying a series of graduating classes had the following explanation: “This photo motivates us to do our best because of the people we look up to. It makes us want to graduate and move onto bigger and better things” (*Graduates*, NI). In this example, inspiration from others leads to the motivation to move forward as students look towards future goals.



*If you have snacks they give you good nutritional values that can keep you engaged, focused, and give you a better day. (Granola Bar, Figure 19)*

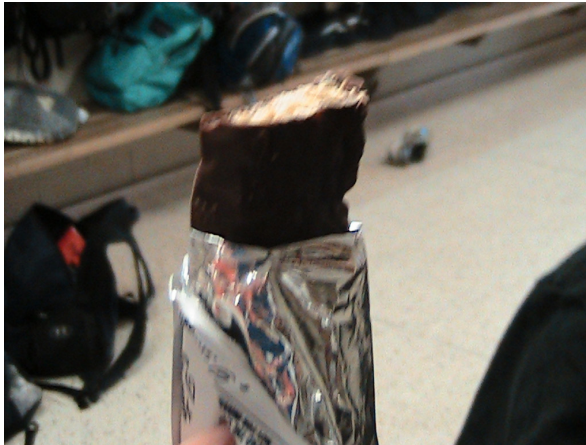


FIGURE 19. *Granola bar*

*Nourishment.* While only represented by 2 photographs, great insight is offered here as to what students require physically to engage in learning. Building on the description for *Granola Bar* (Figure 19), the description for *Water Fountain* (Figure 20) reads: “It keeps you aware, hydrated, focused, and flushes unnecessary wastes from your body.” While we may perhaps smirk at this description given by a Grade 8 student, key questions are raised surrounding expectations placed on learners. We can see that this group of students, unlike other groups, focused on physical needs as necessary to engagement based on the idea of being able to focus, maintain energy, and lead to “a better day” overall.



FIGURE 20. *Water fountain*

*Kids enjoy art and they are more engaged when they enjoy what they're doing.  
(Fish, Figure 21)*



FIGURE 21. *Fish*

*Enjoyment.* Another key descriptor that emerged from the photograph rationales was that of enjoyment or fun. Interestingly, many of these images were linked to subject-specific photographs and expanded on a link between enjoyment and interest noted in the original study. For example, in the picture titled *Fish* (Figure 22), participants suggested, “Kids enjoy art and they are more engaged when they enjoy what they’re doing.” *The Music Room* (Figure 22) similarly conveyed a space where all were “eager to learn” due to the enjoyable nature of music itself as well as the challenge inherent in learning new instruments: “students find music enjoyable and challenging making them pay attention and therefore are more engaged.”



FIGURE 22. *The music room*

In relation to outdoor spaces, *The Yard* (Figure 23) and *Playground Sign* (Figure 24) also depicted enjoyable times, though specific to social times with friends. *The Yard* (Figure 23), for example, suggested that engagement was part of “enjoying times with friends,” while *Playground Sign* (Figure 24) offered further insight into the ways this social time helped students to “be more focused on school work afterwards.” The suggestion that this time leads to greater focus or engagement with schoolwork is also reminiscent of two earlier themes, that of collaboration and nourishment, both speaking to the need for breaks from structured learning in order to be able to maintain engagement throughout the school day.



FIGURE 23. *The yard*



FIGURE 24. *Playground sign*

This picture shows us a variety of different books that can help us learn more and discover new things. (Books, Figure 25)



FIGURE 25. Books

*Discovery.* Another predominant theme was that of discovery or being able to explore and experience new things, whether through *Books* (Figure 25), *Music Instruments* (Figure 26) or the *Computers* (Figure 27). Regardless of whether it was “doing science experiments” (*Science Class*, Figure 28) or “researching a historical figure and turning it into art” (*Martin Luther King*, Figure 29), or “a new art project that kids never tried” (*Leaping Lizards*, Figure 30), students spoke to situations and tasks that represented newness and discovery. The role of technology also stood out in several pictures. Computers were viewed as tools to “help us learn new things” (*Computers*, Figure 27). An almost identical photograph, *Computer Lab* (Figure 31), elaborated: “This picture represents us engaged as a learner because we are able to research new things as well as learn more about our world through our efficient technology.” While efficiency may not necessarily come to our minds when looking at this photograph, these students viewed computers as efficient tools for engaging in the research process. On the other hand, a photograph of a television, suggested that a simplified version of technology also helped “students pay more attention and therefore are more engaged” (*Television*, Figure 32). Regardless of the tool, the concept of multimodal literacy (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) is evident throughout this theme with opportunities that combine the six dimensions of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing) to foster learning.



FIGURE 26. *Music instruments*



FIGURE 27. *Computers*



FIGURE 28. *Science class*

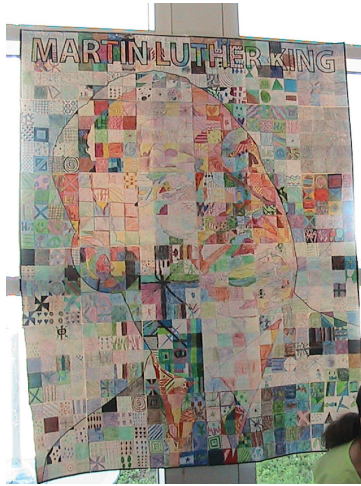


FIGURE 29. *Martin Luther King*



FIGURE 30. *Leaping lizards*



FIGURE 31. *Computer lab*

FIGURE 32. *Television*

Interestingly, while the importance of technology was highlighted, the use of science and sports equipment, as well as musical instruments was also seen to foster this sense of discovery. For example, *Music Instruments* (Figure 26) focused on “learning new techniques and new notes on all of our instruments,” while a picture of the door to the music room suggested it was a space that “helps us learn by making our own rhythms with instruments and exploring new things.” Of course, the use of these tools to foster discovery also comes with questions of access, time spent, and priorities in education. As *Music Instruments* (Figure 26) illustrates, this school had access to a wide range of instruments, something not all schools are afforded, either due to lack of resources or cutbacks that affect music programs. Yet, the students’ engagement and desire to learn music was evident through their comments. They viewed tools such as instruments as central to their engagement as learners. In a beautiful photograph of piano keys, one group concluded: “We are engaged in the arts which is represented by the piano keys” (*Piano Keys*, Figure 33).

FIGURE 33. *Piano keys*

One final photograph relates to outdoor spaces, but unlike the others, it offers a counter example in terms of something that might be missing. For *The Great Outdoors* (Figure 34), participants shared, “Kids like learning outside because you get fresh air and it’s something new that you don’t usually do.” Sadly, the understanding conveyed here, in particular by the title of the photograph, suggests a lack of time for learning outside, along with the idea that this is something students like to do. From the viewpoint of the students themselves, the need for outdoor education opportunities is conveyed in a powerful way.



FIGURE 34. *The great outdoors*

*The place where we learned everything that we know today and the place that will keep teaching us to help us succeed in our future. (Our School, NI)*

**A future purpose.** This final theme reflects a small selection of photographs that were summative in nature, and considered the goal of learning. While engagement is not suggested specifically in any of these descriptions, the photographs represented here highlight the goal, or perhaps even the hope, that school is a place that engages learners. *School* (NI), for example, highlights the school building as a place where “we learn subjects that we can use in the future.” A similar picture, *Our School* (NI), presents school as a space that contributes to success as learners: “The place where we learned everything that we know today and the place that will keep teaching us to help us succeed in future.” Finally, a third photograph, *Classroom* (Figure 35), represents the students’ desks as a space “where our teacher educated us with everyday knowledge” and where students “grow and begin to understand more about our future.” In each of these examples, future purpose and goals for achievement are linked as students look towards high school.





FIGURE 35. *Classroom*

## DISCUSSION

McMahon (2003) outlined three roles taken by teachers to achieve engagement. In the first role, the teacher presents material using various strategies to interest students. In the second role, the teacher is a facilitator of the material, with students' interests at the forefront. In the third role, the teacher works alongside students with the goal of making connections beyond the curriculum to student's lived experiences. Critical pedagogy and antiracist education are at the forefront of this third role.

Interestingly, although the specific role of the teacher was mentioned in only one written description, each of these roles is demonstrated in the photographs taken. An example of the first role, teacher as presenter, is found in *Classroom* (Figure 35). Here, the desks are used as a symbol of learning and a space where teachers educate students with everyday knowledge. While the word "everyday" suggests authentic learning experiences, a concern arises as we see the teacher represented as the one giving knowledge. Reminiscent of McMahon and Portelli's (2004) critique of engagement as something done to students by teachers, there is a sharp contrast between summative-type photographs (e.g. *Classroom*, *Our School*, *School*) with those that speak to a greater shared process that involves students beyond just the classroom desks. Also reflecting this first role are photographs, such as *Bump Up Board* (Figure 15) and *Wow Wicked Words* (Figure 14), where the teacher presents helpful information to support student goals for improvement.

The second role, teacher as facilitator, is found throughout the photographs. *Book Graffiti Wall* (Figure 3), for example, allows students to share their reading interests. Other photographs, such as *Science Experiments* (Figure 4) point to strategies and tools used by teachers to build upon interests. Collaborative art projects like *Martin Luther King* (Figure 8) and *Heart* (Figure 9) also fit this

category, as teachers would have facilitated a shared learning process. Within this second grouping of photographs, there is the potential for meaningful engagement as students become interactively involved in their learning.

Establishing connections beyond the curriculum, the third role, is reflected in the examples of *Anti-bully Commitment* (NI) and *Pledge* (Figure 11), which focused on making a difference and strengthening school community. *Computer Lab* (Figure 31) highlighted the role of computers to “learn more about our world,” while *Olympic* (Figure 16) and *Motivational Poster* (Figure 17) focused on goal setting as a tool for making personal connections as learners, both within and outside of the classroom. No specific examples related to social justice appeared in the photographs, an underlying goal of this third role.

In addition to the teacher’s role, the students’ photographs also reinforce Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social learning. Students highlighted the role of collaboration and the shared learning and negotiations that resulted from being engaged alongside and with others. Similar goals for collaboration were found by Parsons et al. (2015) and Carrington et al. (2013). The role of talk in particular, as suggested in *Working Together* (NI), speaks to the need for collaborative and communicative participation. The IRA Position Statement on Adolescent Literacy promotes a similar understanding in Point #5, conveying opportunities for collaborative talk as something students deserve when engaging in literacy activities. I suggest the same is true of all subjects as literacy crosses the content areas. Bainbridge and Heydon (2013) wrote: “Sometimes we read our way into understanding, sometimes we talk ourselves into understanding and sometimes we create images or write ourselves into understanding” (p. 331). This study provided the opportunity for students to share their understandings in each of these three ways.

Finally, what stood out from this experience were the ways in which photography served to engage Grade 8 students in discussions about engagement. When given respect for their voices and actively enabled to move in and out of the classroom space to share their learning, students were able to enact engagement while conveying what it meant to them. One of the classroom teachers noted the engagement of several groups, and drew excitement from observing their participation. It may be this recognition that sparks the beginning of conversations about engagement in learning as spoken of earlier by Washor and Mojkowski (2014) and Zyngier (2007).

Notably, several students spoke about a similar experience with a photography project earlier in the year. Having learned about perspective, angles, and other photography-related elements, they travelled to a ravine to put their new learning into action. Offering insight into how this experience engaged them as learners, one student wrote: “The moment that stood out the most for me this year was when we got to go in the ravine and got to take photos. It engaged me because we got more freedom and it was something different instead of a paper and pencil.”

The theme of discovery is reinforced as this student recalls a freedom in learning that is reminiscent of Cambourne's (1988) condition of approximation where "learners must be free to approximate the desired model – 'mistakes' are essential for learning to occur" (p. 33).

This experience also took learning outside, an aspect of engagement noted earlier by students, and provided the opportunity to move beyond print literacy (e.g. reading and writing) towards greater multimodal expression (e.g. representation and viewing). Within this study, photography similarly offered an avenue for integrating the six dimensions of literacy to increase student engagement in learning.

### MOVING FORWARD

There is indeed much to consider from these Grade 8 students' visual representations. As educators, these student voices remind us of the need to encourage, challenge, motivate, and inspire learners, as well as provide opportunities for discovery, research, and enjoyment in learning. Considering the ways in which we perceive engagement (Scheffel, 2012, 2016), very few of the pictures related to the "look" of engagement, most likely due to the nature of the photographs. The focus was not on learning "in action" but of choices made to highlight spaces, places, and items that represented engagement. Future research might expand upon students' understandings with follow-up interviews to discuss what additional photographs they might have taken if able to include others. In addition, interviews with classroom teachers will serve to expand educator's goals for engaging learners, also offering greater insight into key moments of engagement, such as those highlighted by students.

In conclusion, I offer several questions for educators as we continue to ponder conceptions of engagement through the lens of our students:

- What does engagement mean to you as a learner / educator?
- What examples have you observed that you think signify engagement in learning? How do these examples relate to the photographs shared in this paper?
- How will you create opportunities for engagement with your future students?

It is my hope that the photographs shared here will serve to continue the conversation as we aim to engage the learners before us.

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