Coaching the Shift from Engaging Teaching to Engaged Learners: Knowing Students, Building Belonging

An Education Week article, *"Many Students Are Disengaged From Learning. What Can Schools Do?"* (September 8, 2026) reported that fewer than half of surveyed students said most or all of their teachers appeared excited about what they were teaching. Only 37 percent said most of their teachers made what they taught interesting. Even fewer reported that teachers regularly connected their learning to real-world uses or future career possibilities.

The article offered a seemingly simple formula for engaging students: "It starts with the teacher." Students are more likely to invest in learning when they sense that the teacher is invested—in the content, in the learning, and in them. Teacher enthusiasm communicates that the learning matters. Relevance helps students see why it might matter to them. Relationships create the trust that supports students in taking risks, expressing uncertainty, and persisting when learning becomes difficult.

I think of engaging teaching as the teacher actions and learning conditions designed to invite students' attention, curiosity, participation, thinking, and investment. The word invite is important. Teachers cannot manufacture engagement, but they can create opportunities and reasons for students to engage.

Engaging teaching creates the invitation. Engaged learners respond by investing attention, effort, thinking, curiosity, and persistence.

Knowing Students Is the Place to Begin

Teachers cannot make meaningful connections to students' interests, experiences, strengths, cultures, concerns, and aspirations without knowing them.

That knowing extends beyond awareness of students' academic performance. What matters to them? Where do they already invest attention and effort? What experiences have shaped how they approach school and learning? What do they imagine for their futures? When do they display confidence, curiosity, creativity, or persistence?

Dave Stuart Jr.'s work with **Moments of Genuine Connection** offers teachers a practical way to develop that knowledge. A Moment of Genuine Connection, or MGC, is a brief, genuine interaction in which a teacher communicates interest in a student as a person. The interaction does not need to be lengthy or dramatic. A question about what drew a student to a subject or what they enjoy outside school, followed by genuine listening, can open the door to connection.

Stuart suggests that teachers naturally tend to connect with two groups: the students they especially enjoy and the students about whom they are most concerned. The students most likely to be overlooked are those in the middle—the quiet, shy, reserved, or compliant students who do what is expected without drawing much attention.

Tracking attempts at Moments of Genuine Connection can help teachers notice who they know and who may remain largely unknown.

A teacher might ask a coach to observe:

- Which students does the teacher naturally connect with?
- Which students receive attention because the teacher is concerned about them?
- Who tends to remain quietly in the middle?

- What opportunities for connection occur during the lesson?
- How do different students respond to the teacher's attempts at connection?

The observation gives the teacher and coach evidence to explore together. Are some students receiving substantially more relational attention than others? Which students respond readily to the teacher's invitations? Which students appear hesitant or remain distant? What might the teacher want to learn about them?

Moments of Genuine Connection are not simply a technique for getting students to engage. They are opportunities for teachers to become curious about students. Stuart adds that the teacher may be the person who benefits most from these interactions. Building connections with a broader and more diverse group of students expands the teacher's understanding and creates more possibilities for engagement.

From Knowing Students to Building Belonging

Knowing about students is different from knowing how students experience us and our classrooms.

In Timothy Montalvo's guest blog, "**What Are Your Students Experiencing? The Interactions That Shape Belonging, Learning, and Success**," he illustrates how students experience school through a series of moments. They experience how they are greeted, how adults respond when they make mistakes, whether their effort is noticed, whether their questions are welcomed, and whether they are treated as learners or as problems to be managed.

Montalvo contrasts two responses to a student arriving late. One teacher welcomes the student and redirects him into the learning. Another draws public attention to the repeated lateness. Both teachers may care about the student. Both may believe they are holding the student accountable. But the student's experience of the two interactions is not the same.

That example raises an important distinction. Two teachers may care equally about a student while creating very different experiences for that student. A teacher's intent matters, but the student's experience influences whether they feel safe enough to ask questions, express uncertainty, attempt something difficult, and recover from mistakes.

A student who is unsure how a teacher will respond may protect themselves by remaining quiet, avoiding challenging work, or appearing not to care. What looks like a lack of motivation may sometimes be a student's response to uncertainty about belonging, dignity, or psychological safety.

That distinction suggests another important area for coaching. A coach and teacher might explore:

- How do students experience the teacher's interest in them?
- Which interactions communicate, "You belong here"?
- How does the teacher respond when students make mistakes

or struggle?
- To what extent are questions and uncertainty welcomed?
- Does correction invite students back into the learning or move them farther away?
- In what ways do different students experience the classroom differently?

A teacher might ask a coach to focus an observation on several students. What happens when each student enters the room, contributes an idea, requests help, makes a mistake, or becomes disengaged? How does the student respond to the teacher's words, tone, proximity, or redirection?

The coach might also collect students' language. What do students say when they are uncertain? Who do they approach for help? Do they readily share unfinished thinking? How do they respond when a classmate makes a mistake? These actions can provide evidence of the belonging and safety they experience.

The question is not simply, "Do I care about my students?" It is, "How are my students experiencing my care?"

Coaching From Intentions to Experiences

Teachers' positive intentions are important, but intentions alone do not tell us what students are experiencing. A coach can help a teacher see the classroom through the students' eyes—not by evaluating whether the teacher has built good relationships or prescribing a relationship-building program, but by helping the teacher identify questions, gather evidence, explore student responses, and decide what they want to try next.

Knowing students and building belonging do not guarantee engagement. They do, however, create conditions in which students are more likely to invest attention, effort, thinking, curiosity, and persistence.

Coaching can help teachers look beyond their intentions and

study students’ experiences:

Which students do I know?

Which students might I be overlooking?

What messages are students receiving through their daily interactions with me?

How are those experiences influencing students’ willingness to participate, take risks, persist, and seek help?

What might I need to learn about my students—and from my students?

Knowing students and building belonging are the beginning of the shift from engaging teaching to engaged learners. In a follow-up blog, I will explore how coaches and teachers can identify evidence of student engagement, design stronger invitations to engage, and support students in taking greater ownership of their engagement.