



The Need for a Mind Jolt: Reimagining Student Engagement

In research commissioned by the Institute for Educational Reform, Associate Professor Amanda McGraw analysed student drawings of their subjective experience of learning across three Victorian research projects spanning nearly 20 years. By asking students to draw rather than answer questions, the research captures what surveys rarely can: how young people depict engaged learning and what classroom conditions get in the way of it.

What students say is happening in classrooms

- Learning is passive and transmission-based. Knowledge is poured in. Students receive.
- Classrooms are drawn as jailhouses: one right answer, no creativity, no agency, no room to cross the line.
- Students feel sorted, labelled and humiliated. Learning is a race with clear winners and losers.
- Collaboration, dialogue and belonging are almost entirely absent.

What disengagement actually looks like

- Boredom and mind-wandering is the single most dominant theme across all three studies.
- Students have developed sophisticated strategies to perform engagement while being completely switched off: pretending to read, using AI, regurgitating teacher language.

And yet, students know what good learning feels like

- Engaged learning is active, curious, questioning and connected to the real world.
- Deep engagement involves safety, flow and personal discovery.
- When students feel safe and curious, learning feels generative and joyful.

Students know what it feels like to be engaged and curious. It's time to centre learning around their needs.

To download the full report go to www.educationalreform.org.au

