INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Voice, Choice, and Belonging –

Understanding and responding to student disengagement in Victoria's schools

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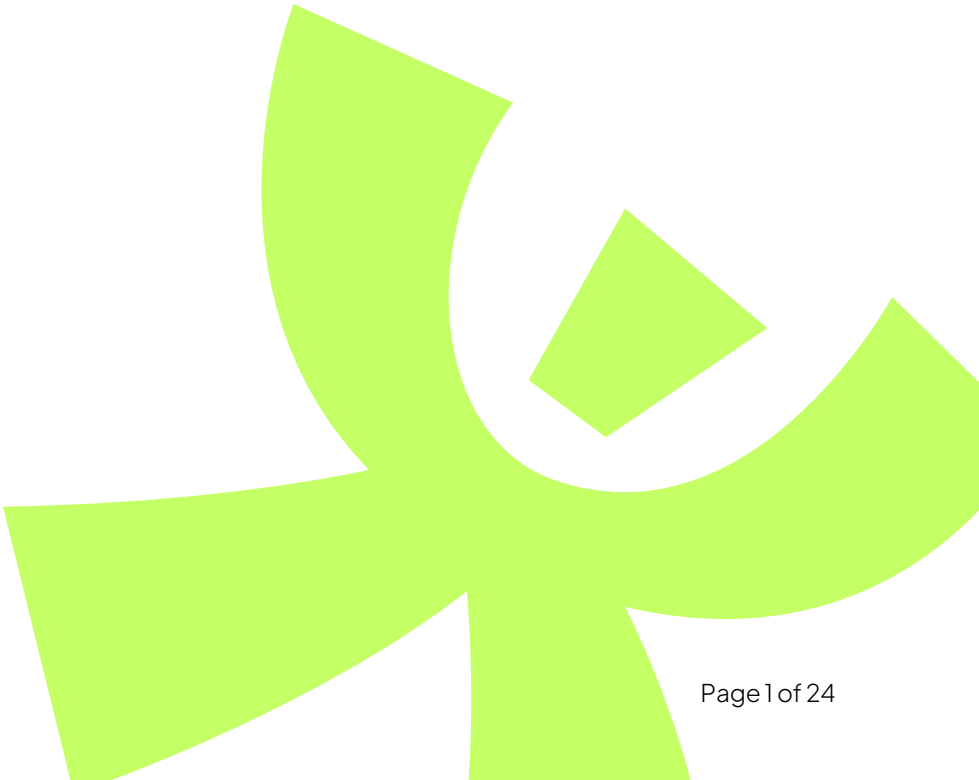
Commissioned by Elevo Institute and The Institute for Educational Reform



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Please cite as:

Longmuir, F. (2025). Voice, Choice, and Belonging – Understanding and responding to student disengagement in Victoria's schools. Monash University.

Introduction

Victoria's schools are facing complex challenges, and the consequences of not responding will be dire for our communities. These challenges have been exacerbated since the COVID pandemic and the extended lockdown periods experienced by Victorians (Learning First, 2020). At the core of these challenges are students. The children and young people in our schools are increasingly demonstrating that their experiences are not supporting them to develop into healthy, thriving members of our communities. Mental health concerns for young people are rising (Department of Education and Training Victoria [DET Vic], 2023a; Mission

Australia, 2024). School attendance rates are declining (Hudson & Ambrosy, 2024). Fewer students are completing year 12 (Howard & Bills, 2023) and suspensions and expulsions have increased (Delibasic & Borg, 2025; DET Vic, 2018; DET Vic, 2023b). It is evident that supporting students to more productively engage in their schooling requires greater attention.

While these data suggest that schooling in Victoria is becoming more challenging for students to engage in, policy drivers are increasingly doubling down on narrow and standardised priorities for schooling (Daliri-Ngametua, et al., 2024; MacDonald et al., 2026). One example of this is the new Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0, which prioritises cognitive learning processes and minimises crucial social and relational factors (DET Vic, 2024a).

While cognitive components of learning are undeniably important, for students in the early years of secondary schooling there is significantly more that is needed to ensure that they are engaged and successful life-long learners. Student engagement policies in Victoria emphasise procedural fairness, positive reinforcement, and inclusive environments, but often lack sufficient focus on relational and emotional dimensions of learning (DET Vic, 2024b; DET Vic, 2024c).

This report presents key constructs and models of student engagement, a review of Australian research on engagement, and a discussion of key drivers that could be considered to improve student engagement in Victoria's schools.

Methodology

This paper was commissioned by the Elevo Institute. The paper is informed by a rapid evidence review. The research strategy included review of relevant peer reviewed literature and a desktop review of relevant policies and programs that relate to the Victorian secondary school context. Monash University Library resources and programs were used to locate relevant academic resources and online, desktop search methods used to find relevant policy documents and websites.

The search strategy privileged research from the past two decades, while also including some seminal papers that illuminated key constructs and ideas. For some sections, Australian research was focused on to ensure that findings were most contextually appropriate for the purpose of this paper. All sources were scanned for relevance by a review of titles, keywords and abstracts. Included sources were then reviewed and analysed for appropriate themes and used to inform appropriate sections of the paper below.

Key constructs and models of student engagement

Interest in student engagement has long been a concern of educators. Acknowledging that there can be no learning without engagement, the construct of student engagement has drawn significant attention in the literature. An early review of student engagement literature was conducted over 4 decades ago and more recent scholarship, some of which informs the sections below, considers student engagement to be a multidimensional or meta-construct (Reschly & Christenson, 2022).

The Tri-partite Behavioural (doing), Emotional (feeling) and Cognitive (thinking) dimensions of engagement

The most prevalent conceptualisation in the literature is of three primary dimensions: behavioural, emotional (or affective) and cognitive engagement (Archambault et al., 2019; Fredricks et al., 2019; Reschly & Christenson, 2022). Behavioural engagement refers to what students do in terms of attendance, active participation in academic and extracurricular activities, and prosocial conduct (Fredricks et al., 2019; Furlong et al., 2003). Emotional engagement considers how students feel about school, learning and as well as their attitudes to peers and teachers (Fredricks et al., 2019; Reschly & Christenson, 2022). The emotional or affective dimension considers feelings of belonging and connections as well as enjoyment of learning and school activities. The final commonly described dimension of student engagement is cognitive engagement which considers the thinking and mental investment students make in their learning, as well as their ability to self-regulate in order to engage appropriately, and their perceptions of the relevance of education experiences (Archambault et al., 2019; Fredricks, et al., 2019; Reschley & Christenson, 2022). While all three dimensions

are important to consider in terms of their impact on engagement, emotional engagement has been shown to act as an antecedent to behavioural and cognitive engagement (Archambault et al., 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019; Quin, et al., 2017). This is particularly evident when students' feelings of interest, enjoyment and belonging at school are enhanced (Ely et al., 2013; Quin, et al., 2017)

Another useful, and related, division in the literature on engagement is to distinguish between engagement in learning (i.e., cognitive and psychological processes and academic outcomes) and engagement in school (belonging, emotional connection, relationships) both of which have been shown to be important to student success and achievement (Allen & Bowles, 2022; Furlong, et al., 2003).

Models of engagement and disengagement

Constructions that distinguish differing aspects of engagement are useful for determining where and how to invest attention and effort into the issues of engagement. Authors have used such conceptualisations in a range of ways for the purpose of investigating engagement for a range of audiences. A useful example is that of Anderson and Winthrope (2025) who describe four modes of student engagement: Resister, Passenger, Achiever, and Explorer. These modes reflect the varied dimensions of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement to describe the ways that students present as engaged or disengaged in their schooling and learning and the consequences for their success and wellbeing.

- Resister mode is the most visible and recognisable from of student disengagement. Anderson and Winthorpe (2025) describe students in resister mode as 'rejecting' school. Their behaviours may include disruptive and damaging actions that reflect their emotional and cognitive disconnection.
- Passenger mode refers to students who 'coast' through school, with limited effort or engagement in their learning. They may not draw attention, but are not emotionally or cognitively thriving.
- Achiever mode is another form of less visible disengagement. These students are driven by a narrow conceptualisation of achievement and while they seem behaviourally engaged, they are emotionally vulnerable (often resulting in mental illhealth) and cognitively overburdened with minimal authentic interest.
- Explorer mode is how Anderson and Winthrope (2025) describe the ideally engaged student. These students are intrinsically motivated and curious, emotionally balanced and resilient, and their behavioural engagement is authentic. These students are able to access their own agency, autonomy and interest and thrive in environments that foster voice, choice and creative inquiry.

While this model is not the only representation of student engagement, it is particularly helpful in illuminating the spectrum of student engagement and making visible the possible consequences of varied levels of disengagement on effective learning and wellbeing. The model highlights that the concern needs to be not only for those students who are blatantly

disengaged (i.e., resister mode), often obvious to us due to disruptive behaviours or chronic absence, but there are others who are less visibly disengaged, yet at risk of ill-being and/or implications for their learning development and life outcomes.

Anderson and Winthrope's (2025) model illustrates the intersections of behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions and demonstrates that student engagement work needs to consider both engagement in learning and engagement in schools so that students can more regularly connect, learn, and thrive.

Australian Student Engagement Research

This section outlines themes that emerged from an examination of research focused on student engagement from Australian researchers and in the Australian context. This body of research included 15 papers published between the years of 2011 and 2024. In sum, this work shows that attention to student engagement is crucial for a range of outcomes and benefits for students including short-term improvements in academic achievement and social and emotional wellbeing as well as longer term life success indicators, such as further study, employment opportunities and participation in communities (Smyth & Robinson, 2014; Tomaszewski et al., 2024).

Teaching practice strategies

While acknowledging that the reasons for student disengagement are complex and individual, this literature notes that teachers are an important, and adjustable factor within the school environment that can make a difference across all the dimensions of engagement. Teaching quality (importantly this is distinct from teacher quality in that teaching quality focuses on teaching practices not the training or qualification levels of teachers) is a crucial moderator which can be attended to in order to make a difference in students' perceptions of their school experiences and therefore improve their engagement. A key focus area of teacher practice for the purpose of student engagement is supportive interactions (Quin et al., 2017).

Quin et al., (2017) undertook a study of year 7 students in Victorian high schools to examine the influence of teacher quality on student engagement. Teacher quality was understood as practices that supported student autonomy, student competence and relatedness (i.e., a sense of care and connection between student and teacher). The authors argue that the key factor in conceptualisations of teaching quality should not be technical instruction but rather the ability of teachers to foster interactions with students that meet their psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Their study of these aspects of teacher practice on student engagement found that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement all improved (accounting for individual and family factors) and further that relatedness support uniquely predicted emotional engagement. The conclusions from this study were that teachers' attention to fostering positive relationships enhances engagement which underscores the importance of a balance of care and academic focuses in classrooms.

The role of teacher-student relationships is then key to these teaching practices that enhance student engagement, particularly as Quin et al., (2017) found, in the foundational emotional dimension. Strong relationships where teachers are perceived as kind, caring, and patient have been found to be critical to successful student engagement. Teachers who demonstrate care and respect for their students, who treat their students as intelligent young people, who show that they care about students' lives, and who are approachable have been found to support engagement in several studies (Chandra-Handa, 2020; Collie, 2024).

A related key finding about teaching practices that support engagement is the effect of differentiation practices on cognitive engagement. Differentiation occurs when learning experiences are adapted based on students' needs and interests (Chandra-Handa, 2020).

Attention to the teacher-student relationship outlined above continues to be important here as knowing students' needs and interests is more likely when strong relationships are in place. Research has further found that differentiation strategies that support higher-order thinking, problem solving, and metacognition are all associated with stronger cognitive engagement (Chandra-Handa, 2020). Kelly et al., (2023) found that ownership, relevance and enjoyment are characteristics of learning experiences that students value and that contribute to engagement. Activities that are authentic, and support inquiry and curiosity are connected to higher levels of engagement. Research is clear that student engagement is increased by differentiation to align learning with students with needs and interests.

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Transition point challenges to student engagement

While as described in the prior section, there is significant research that understands student engagement through cogitative, emotional and behavioural dimensions, and a clear agreement that teaching practices can make a difference to levels of engagement in learning and consequently schooling, there is also acknowledgement that there are specific stages of development and context factors which make students more vulnerable to disengagement from education.

A well-documented and understood period of risk of disengagement is the developmental stage that coincides with what is commonly termed 'the middle years' of grades five to nine,

covering the ages of approximately 8-14 years old. Developmentally these years see children moving through adolescence which is the most rapid period of physical and cognitive growth apart from infancy. During this period, students become more self-aware and reflective. They are driven to establish an individual identity and develop a sense of their place in the world (Evans-Whipp, et al., 2017). To do this successfully, students need greater opportunity for agency to shape their environments and to make choices for themselves. This phase is also characterised by increases in the influence of peers and likelihood of risk taking and often sees significant changes in social relationships (EvansWhipp, et al., 2017). We also know that during these middle years while students are at heightened risk of disengagement, they are more likely to experience emotional and behaviour problems, (Burns, et al., 2018) with research showing that 50% of all mental health problems have begun by the age of 14 (Evans-Whipp, et al., 2017). Further, students with persistent behavioural, emotional or engagement challenges though these years have associated reductions in academic learning outcomes (Evans-Whipp, et al., 2017).

While the entire middle years of schooling period should be concerned with the inherent vulnerabilities of this developmental stage of students, it is also evident that the structures of schooling in Australia present a further contextual challenge with the transition from primary into secondary schooling adding stressors to this time. The research describes the move from "the more familiar and personal surroundings of primary setting to a usually much larger and more complex secondary school setting" as one of the most significant transitions in a child's life (Evans-Whipp et al., 2017, p. 40). Evans-Whipp et al. (2017) found from their longitudinal Child to Adolescence Transition study with over 1200 students, that increased anxiety was related to a more demanding curriculum, challenging logistical arrangements (including the variety of teachers), and disruption to peer relationships. Despite the understanding of the clear risks to students, the Victorian Auditor General's Office ([VAGO], 2015) noted that many students experience a drop in engagement and achievement as a result of this transition and that this negative impact can be cumulative in to the following years of secondary schooling.

Engagement and equity

Australia has one of the most unequal education systems in the OECD. By year nine students from disadvantaged, low SES households are often several years behind their high advantaged peers (Cobbold, 2022). Research that has considered student engagement has found that students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to be engaged in schooling (Tomaszewski, et al., 2020). Students from these disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to report behavioural issues, such as involvement in bullying incidences, more likely to be absent from school, and less likely to report that they like school or feel that they belong to their school (Tomaszewski, et al., 2020). However, it has also been established that engagement is an important mediator of achievement for students from lower SES backgrounds, with improved engagement more strongly related to improved academic outcomes. Tomaszewski, et al., (2020) suggest that attention to student engagement should be seen as an impactful way to mitigate the impact of economic disadvantage on student

achievement and that a policy focus on engagement strategies would be reap rewards in terms of the achievement gap for these students.

Summary of Australian Student Engagement Research

This body of work demonstrates that student engagement is important for a range of reasons. Where students are engaged across the domains of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional, they are more likely to have a range of successful experiences and outcomes from their education. These included academic, social, and health (especially mental health) benefits that will serve them throughout their lives. This research shows that the middle years of schooling (years five-nine), which students are navigating whilst also growing and developing through the tumultuous period of adolescence, are crucial to student success at school. That one of the most disruptive transition periods occurs at the height of adolescent development, results in a period of high risk to ongoing engagement and success at school. While there are a range of contextual and individual factors that impact on engagement, there are teaching practices and approaches that have been shown to increase engagement. These include attention to relationship building, authentic and inquiry-based learning experiences, and differentiation that caters for varied student learning needs.

Key drivers of student engagement

From the understandings of student engagement and its importance for student learning and thriving, the following sections will look in more depth at three key areas that could inform school values and approaches to education, particularly in those most vulnerable middle years of compulsory schooling. These lenses foreground components of education that are often less attended to in the official and explicit policy, planning, and practice work of schools and school systems, yet they cover deeply important aspects of human learning and flourishing within the contexts of our modern societies. With greater attention to these areas to balance out current standardising, narrow, and deprofessionalising policy trends, there is more hope for a better supported future generation of thriving and flourishing young people who can respond to the challenges of their lives.

Belonging

Research has consistently linked a strong sense of belonging at school with school engagement. A well-developed sense of belonging provides the social and academic scaffolding needed for students to feel connected, resilient, and motivated. A strong sense of belonging incorporates the development of meaningful and productive relationships with teachers and peers. Students who feel they belong are less likely to disengage from schooling and more likely to report enhanced academic and personal wellbeing.

Belonging is a fundamental and universal human psychological need that is innate and experienced across the lifetime (Allen & Boyle, 2022). School belonging refers to a students'

perception of being accepted, valued, and included within their school community and includes feelings of connection to peers, teachers, and the broader school institution that they attend (Allen, et al., 2024; Allen, et al., 2025; Korpershoek et al, 2020). Students who feel that they belong to their class group, peers, and school are more likely to experience positive engagement and consequently improved learning and wellbeing outcomes. Peer belonging is most closely linked to social and emotional engagement; teacher belonging to emotional and behavioural engagement; and institutional belonging to cognitive engagement and academic achievement (Knifsend, et al., 2022; Korpershoek et al., 2023; Osterman, 2023; Turan Bora & Altan, 2025).

This evidence is clear that schools and teachers need to attend to students' sense of belonging in the interests of enhanced engagement and improved outcomes. Belonging exists at a fundamentally affective level and is associated with attachment, affiliation, and safety. Students report that feeling cared for and valued by their teachers and schools is important to their connections (Allen, et al., 2025; Allen, et al., 2024). The importance of relationships is key and learning environments that value space for care and connection and explicitly support positive relationships will better foster student belonging. An important factor here is a sense of inclusion and being valued. Students' diverse identities and differences need to be "…accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment" (Korpershoek, et al., 2020, p. 665). Studies have also shown that perceptions and experiences of safety at school are an important mediator for students' sense of belonging. Lovat (2023, p.11) contends, "…no efficacious learning will be happening if students do not feel physically secure in their environment" showing that the learning environment must be free from hazards and physically comfortable in order for a sense of belonging to develop and engagement to follow. Lovat (2023) also found that when students have a sense of agency by accepting some responsibility for safety and positive relationships in their learning environment, the atmosphere of care and safety was enhanced and relatedly, belonging and engagement increased.

Aspiration

The place of students' aspirations and beliefs about their futures has been considered by some literature as an influence on school engagement. Conceptualising aspiration and considering the influence of hopes for a future life on school engagement has been presented in several ways through the reviewed literature with each having varied implications for the possibility of improving student engagement. Firstly, students who have educational and career aspirations that are aligned with the opportunities that they have at school, are more likely to be engaged in their education (Chung et al., 2023; Plasman, 2018). Conversely, aspirations for future careers and further educational attainment (for example higher degree study) are fostered by engagement in schooling (Gutman & Schoon, 2018).

While this interrelationship between aspiration and engagement seems obvious, a useful conceptualisation for thinking about schooling practices that can support student engagement is Appadurai's (2004) Capacity to Aspire. The capacity to aspire, according to

Appadurai (2004) and in adaptions by others (c.f. Bok, 2010; López-Muñoz & Ingelaere, 2021; Longmuir, 2024) refers to the ability to pursue pathways towards achieving one's beliefs about what constitutes a 'good life'. Developed by Appadurai (2004) based on his research with high poverty communities living in India, this conceptualisation emphasises the cultural and collective dimensions of aspiration, rather than viewing it as solely an individual motivational trait. This understanding suggests that aspirations for a good life are widely held, but that the capacity to aspire is 'shaped by social, cultural and economic experiences, and the availability of navigational information is not equally distributed' (Bok, 2010, p. 164). This highlights the importance of schooling in illuminating the pathways to a desired future for students and providing them with the navigational tools they will need to access that preferred future.

Longmuir (2024) argues that dominant schooling arrangements in Australia are framed by tradition and market forces which constrain a capacity to respond to, and support, students' perceptions of the future. With increasingly standardised curriculum and teaching practice requirements, (based on notions of 'best practice' that restrict innovation and creativity in favour of present circumstances heavily influenced by past attitudes), school experiences are often not experienced as relevant by children and young people. This disjuncture between students' school experiences and their beliefs about their future is amplified by the predominantly negative, crisis presentations of the future that exist in the public sphere.

Media and social media concern with environmental, economic and political volatilities result in significant numbers of young people concerned about their future. Walsh, et al., (2025) reported that 99% of young Australians feel anxious and/or pessimistic about their futures, 79% feel that they will be financially worse off than their parents, and 51% reported often worrying about living a healthy and happy life. While real challenges such as climate change, inequity, and political polarisation exist for children and young people, they need schooling experiences that acknowledge these issues and equip them to envision, navigate, and negotiate aspirational futures with positivity, empowerment, innovation, and collaboration (Longmuir, 2024).

Victorian Engagement Policies and Approaches

In Victoria, student engagement has been recognised and attended to in significant policy. The Amplify practice guide (DET Vic, 2019) is designed to help Victorian school leaders and teachers foster student voice, agency, and leadership in their learning. It suggests ways to build the conditions in schools and classrooms to support behaviours and attitudes that empower greater ownership of learning. Amplify proports that empowered students, specifically those who understand the intentions for their learning, participate in assessment, and engage actively, are more motivated and persistent. The Framework for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0 (FISO 2.0) reflects the goals of Amplify in one of the two Dimensions under the Engagement Core Element: "activation of student voice, agency, leadership and learning, including a focus on the self-determination and agency of Koorie students, to strengthen students' participation and engagement in school" (DET Vic, 2024d).

The Amplify practice guide suggests student voice should be understood as more than expression and that students must influence decisions about what and how they learn. It understands student agency as autonomy and self-regulation in learning. The guide suggests that student leadership should include students participating in widespread decision-making and representation across the school. The goals of Amplify were clearly evident in the first Victorian Teaching and Learning Model (VTLM), in which Practice Principle 3 was 'Student voice, agency and leadership empower students and build school pride' (DET Vic, 2022) but are much less visible in the new VTLM 2.0 (DET Vic, 2025) which is more narrowly focused on explicit learning and teaching strategies. This is an important development to note as VTLM 2.0 has significant influence on approaches in schools and arguably reduces the likelihood of attention to student voice, choice and agency practices.

DET Vic (2025) advise that

The VTLM 2.0 provides a streamline presentation, reducing the previous LTLM's 5 components to 2 elements:

1. ***Elements of learning*** – the process of human learning, based on cognitive science, neuroscience and educational psychology
2. ***Elements of teaching*** – representing the evidence-based teaching practice that most effectively support learning: planning, enabling learning, explicit teaching and supported application.

While the VTLM 2.0 does mention student engagement, it is couched in the focus on a narrow conception of learning as cognitive and neurological. The emphasis is on engagement that, for example, supports "attention, focus and regulation" for learning (DET Vic, 2025). The model positions learning as a purely cognitive process, with the four elements of learning devoid of attention to social or contextual influences on learning. The four elements of teaching presented in the model do include 'enabling learning' with reference to positive relationships and cultural responsiveness (DET Vic, 2025), which are important to student engagement. However, a scan of materials and support resources provided illustrates the high priority given to cognitive science and explicit teaching approaches (see arc.education.vic.gov.au).

While of course there are a wide variety of schools and teachers across Victoria engaging with the policies and advice from the DET in many ways, there are some indications that the emphasis on narrowed conceptualisations of learning and teaching are having negative impacts on the provision of rich, inclusive and engaging activities for students in schools. The media, for example, regularly conflate schools implementing narrow models of explicit teaching as evidence of success.

As an illustration of the cost to student engagement, and enjoyment in learning, a recent media story reported on a primary school's improved NAPLAN results credited to a comprehensive "explicit teaching" approach. The story starts with "According to recent data, student satisfaction at [primary school name] has dropped. And [the principal] couldn't be happier" (Duggan, 2025). It goes on to describe how the school has stopped teaching inquiry units and

discontinued a play-based learning approach in the early years, because these were taking away from what the principal determined “the real learning” (Duggan, 2025). The principal describes the shift in culture as a move away from “happy to just do things…[because] the kids really enjoy it” and explains, “let’s get the kids reading, writing, and adding and subtracting so that we can set them up for whatever successful career they have later on in life, not just ‘they had fun at school today’” (Duggan, 2025).

While this media article describes approaches at only one school, there are broader indications that these kinds of views of learning and teaching, bereft of student enjoyment, satisfaction, or engagement, are commonplace in schools across Victoria. As this principal’s descriptions indicate, there is a specific idea of what successful schooling should do (i.e., produce literate and numerate graduates ready for successful careers), and within that, there is little room for alternative views of what else children and young people might need for their futures, meaning little room for their own cares and concerns to be acknowledged or their own aspirations to be fostered.

It is also clear that the VTLM2.0 and associated policies foster the prioritisation of temporal and material resources toward narrow teaching and learning practices which leaves minimal time, space, resources, or energy to be directed to other broader goals. These temporal and material economies are then further exacerbated in contexts of underfunding and teacher shortages, where the standardised approaches are easier to implement and easier to manage than teaching practices that rely on deep and caring relationships and attention to the diverse lives and possible futures of children and young people.

The Potential of Student Voice, Choice, and Agency

With both belonging and aspiration important factors for schools to consider if they are interested in improving student engagement, focusing on student voice, student choice and student agency offers possibilities for modifying current practices and countering the trends and discourses that are narrowing teaching and learning in Victorian schools. The central argument for greater attention to student voice, choice and agency is that schooling must move away from seeing students as passive recipients of knowledge, where education is 'done to' students toward an approach where education is 'done with' children and young people. This guiding principle would see arrangements in schools be more differentiated, more aligned with students’ beliefs about their future, more relevant to their interests, and more relational and caring in general. As has been shown in the prior sections, enhancements in these aspects would increase student engagement and also learning success. As well, by positioning students as capable citizens of their schools and communities, arrangements that amplify their voices, choices, and agency will benefit individual and communal wellbeing, and prepare students to engage productively and resiliently with increasingly complex and demanding societies (Longmuir, 2021).

Student voice refers to students' opinions, feelings, and beliefs expressed through various forms, extending beyond verbal communication. Rooted in democratic principles and human rights, it empowers learners to influence decisions affecting their education, from policies to curriculum design (Gardiner & Ohi, 2023). Research shows student voice enhances confidence, motivation, engagement, and citizenship skills, while improving teacher practice and fostering inclusive environments (Gardiner & Ohi, 2023). It is linked to global frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms children's right to participate in decisions impacting them. In Australia, national and state legislation reinforces these rights, emphasising their importance in education.

Often the literature uses the term "student voice" somewhat generically to encompass the specific notions of the right to be heard, as well as have choice in, and agency over, learning experiences (Longmuir, 2020). While the three aspects nest productively together, these individual definitions, based on Longmuir (2021) are useful for understanding the potential of "student voice" approaches.

- ***Voice*** refers to the right of children and young people to express their opinions on matters that affect them and to have these opinions considered, aligning with the UNCRC.
- ***Choice*** involves students having significant levels of control over their learning through individualised programs driven by student interest and choice.
- ***Agency*** is the capacity for students to exert influence on the arrangements and practices that shape their experiences, extending beyond the classroom to the structures of the school community.

Research has proposed a range of approaches and practices that can support enhanced student voice, choice, and agency in schooling. Pearce and Wood (2019) generated a framework for student voice that contributes to socially transformative educational practices. Their framework, based on a systematic literature review of a decade of student voice research, offers a useful conceptualisation for schools and systems interested in the amplification of student voice and improved student engagement. Pearce and Wood (2019) claim that current education reforms are making student empowerment and engagement more challenging. A claim that the recent changes to Victorian policy as illustrated in VTLM 2.0 would seem to reflect. Given this, they propose their framework as a reflective dialogical tool that can support teachers, students, policymakers, and researchers to position student voice as a resource for the genuine transformation of institutional structures of schooling.

The framework identifies four integrated themes that reflect the conditions necessary for student voice initiatives to be transformative. Pearce and Wood (2019) claim that if any element is neglected, the voice work is likely to fall short of its transformative goals.

These four essential themes (Pearce & Wood, 2019) are:

1. ***Dialogic:*** This is the foundational element of the framework. 'Initiatives must involve speaking with rather than speaking for others' (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 118). Drawing

on the work of Paulo Freire (1996), the aim is for united reflection and action (praxis) directed toward transforming and humanising the world. It requires participants (staff and students) to critically examine their experiences and views to make explicit any underlying relations of power. Dialogic interactions between those involved in educative experiences in schools (i.e., students and educators) should oppose the 'instrumental rationality of human capital conceptions of education' (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 118) where valued knowledge is seen as separate from human experience. This principle reflects critiques of the ways that 'cognitive science' positions knowledge as located only in the 'brain' and as separate from the body and the environment (for example, Seghal, 2015).

2. ***Intergenerational:*** Transformation requires the considered and thoughtful involvement of adults. This element is crucial because adults hold positions of power and must facilitate participation in ways appropriate to young people, acknowledging their capability to voice opinions. The role of adults extends to creating spaces for meaningful dialogue that are free from relations of force and coercion. Intergenerational relationships need to be based on democratic and participatory principles where the adults believe that young people are capable and their ideas and opinions are valuable, even when they conflict with the standard or traditional practices and arrangements of schools. Without such adult support, student voice initiatives are ineffective or become tokenistic interventions that are done to students for appearances, rather than authentic transformative efforts.
3. ***Collective and Inclusive:*** Transformative student voice work must provide all students the opportunity to empower themselves, actively working against becoming a 'dividing practice' that excludes marginalised students. It must have the broad allegiance of school staff and requires school leaders to support student voice, choice, and agency initiatives. This element ensures the aim of collective change and recognition of social inequalities, rather than merely encouraging only some students to share individual opinions or ideas. This principle rejects more traditionally common approaches to student voice and student leadership programs which tend to privilege those who align with the dominant practices of education and therefore reproduce rather than transform school arrangements and practices. This principle directs attention to those who are more 'difficult to hear because they are a minority; they are difficult to understand; they are silenced in and out of school, by choice or by hegemonic or coercive forces' (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 121). By including diverse voices and ideas, new possibilities become more likely.
4. ***Transgressive:*** Transformative student voice initiatives must be willing to effect real change and cross or transgress traditional borders and power relations. Transgressive voice work represents a "rupture of the ordinary" (Fielding, 2004, cited in Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 123) from the current culture of performativity in education. It equips students with 'activist identities' and the tools to challenge domination, revealing the real boundaries of power and highlighting potential spaces for joint action. If student

voice work is not transgressive, it identifies limits but fails to cross them, ultimately preventing social transformation. It is this transgressive principle that can generate hope for alternative futures and offer spaces for reengagement of those students who need support to aspire despite crisis discourses.

Conclusion

Student engagement is not a peripheral concern, it is the foundation upon which successful learning and thriving futures might be built in Victorian schools. This paper has demonstrated that engagement is multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive domains. The research is clear that these dimensions of engagement intersect to shape students' experiences of schooling in powerful ways. Emotional engagement, in particular, emerges as a critical antecedent to other forms of engagement, underscoring the importance of relationships, belonging, and care within educational environments.

The evidence reviewed highlights that the middle years of schooling represent a period of heightened vulnerability. Developmental changes, combined with structural transitions into secondary schooling, amplify risks of disengagement and associated declines in wellbeing and achievement. These challenges are compounded by systemic inequities, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately affected. Addressing engagement, therefore, is not only an educational imperative but also a matter of social justice.

While policy trends in Victoria increasingly prioritise standardisation and cognitive learning processes, this paper argues for a more balanced approach, one that recognises the relational, affective, and aspirational dimensions of education. Belonging, aspiration, and student voice, choice and agency cannot be optional extras as they are essential drivers of engagement. Schools that cultivate inclusive environments, foster strong teacher-student relationships, and provide opportunities for voice and choice, will create conditions where students can connect, learn, and flourish.

The frameworks and strategies discussed, such as differentiation, inquiry-based learning, and amplification of student voice, offer practical pathways for educators and policymakers. These approaches challenge traditional notions of schooling as something done to students and instead position young people as active partners in their education. Such transformation requires courage to move beyond tokenistic gestures, to embrace dialogic and inclusive practices, and to transgress entrenched norms that limit innovation and equity.

Ultimately, improving student engagement is not a quick fix but a sustained commitment to reimagining schooling as a humanising endeavour. By attending to the emotional and relational foundations of learning, supporting students' capacity to aspire, and empowering their agency, Victorian schools can respond to current challenges and prepare young people for complex futures.

Acknowledgement
I would like to acknowledge the use of the Scopus AI tool which was used to assist with searching, scanning, and organising some of the sources that inform this paper. Scopus AI is a search tool integrated with the main Scopus abstract and citation database drawing exclusively from this content. It is a high-quality platform that Monash University subscribes to and supports.

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