

ORIGINAL PAPER

Moving Beyond Compliance: How Reflection Helped Teachers Rethink Engagement

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Abstract: Student engagement is often interpreted through visible behaviors such as participation, task completion, and compliance; however, these behaviors do not necessarily indicate meaningful cognitive or emotional investment. This classroom-based study examined how three middle school teachers used an Activity Engagement Tool and a structured reflection cycle to better understand and respond to student engagement. Over three months, the teachers documented observable behaviors among approximately 150 students, analyzed patterns across a continuum of engagement, and used their findings to guide instructional changes. The process helped teachers distinguish surface-level participation from authentic engagement and recognize disengagement as a possible indicator of unmet academic, relational, or emotional needs. Supported by professional learning in trauma-informed practices, teachers incorporated student choice, relevant learning experiences, emotional check-ins, positive classroom routines, and meaningful student responsibilities. Findings suggest that systematic observation and reflection can help teachers make more responsive instructional decisions and create learning environments that promote deeper thinking, stronger connections, and greater student ownership.

Keywords: *student engagement, teacher reflection, trauma-informed practices, instructional design, middle school*

The Problem Observed

Student engagement is a frequent topic of discussion among middle-level teachers, often defined by what is visible in the classroom: students paying attention, completing work, or participating in activities. However, these observable behaviors do not always reflect genuine engagement.

In classroom observations, three middle school teachers noticed an important pattern: students could appear engaged while doing very little deep thinking. They completed assignments, nodded along, and

stayed “on task,” yet their cognitive investment remained minimal.

This realization led to a critical question: How can teachers move beyond student compliance to design learning experiences that foster authentic engagement?

A New Way to Think About Engagement

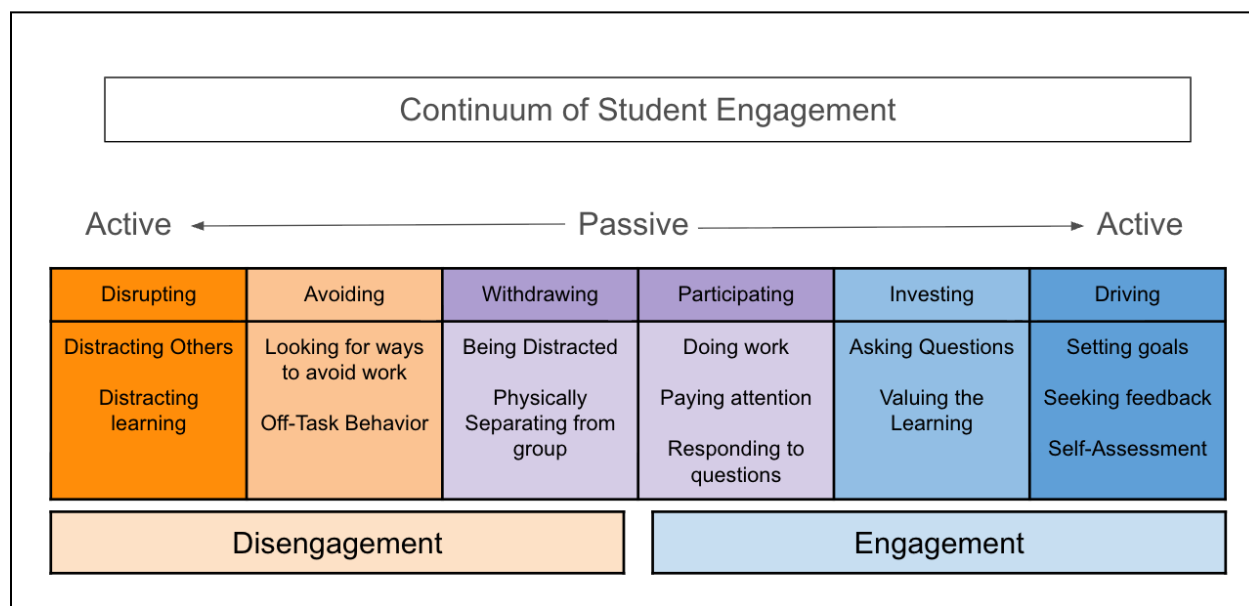
The Continuum of Student Engagement in Figure 1, adapted from Amy Berry's (2020) continuum of engagement, gave teachers a helpful way to rethink this challenge. Rather than treating engagement as a single idea, the continuum describes a progression of student experiences, moving from disrupting, avoiding, and withdrawing

toward participating, investing, and ultimately driving their own learning.

Using this framework shifted teachers' thinking in a subtle but important way. Instead of asking whether students

were doing the work, they began to ask *how students were engaging with it*. That shift changed not only what they noticed in their classrooms, but also how they responded

Figure 1 *Continuum of Student Engagement*



Note. Adapted from the continuum of student engagement presented by Fisher and Frey (2021), based on Berry's (2020) research on student engagement.

What Teachers Tried in Their Classrooms

This classroom-based study took place over three months and involved three middle school teachers whose classrooms collectively included approximately 150 students. Throughout the study, teachers used the Activity Engagement Tool during selected classroom activities to document observable student engagement behaviors. Teachers observed student behaviors during the selected activities and recorded any behaviors listed on the Activity Engagement Tool. Teachers reviewed the collected data to identify patterns in student behaviors across Berry's engagement continuum,

noting which behaviors and engagement levels occurred most frequently. Teachers then used these patterns to identify areas of focus and guide instructional changes throughout the three-month period.

To better understand student engagement, teachers were introduced to Pittman's structured *reflection cycle* (Figure 2), which guided them to *notice* what students were doing, *reflect* on patterns, *learn* from what they observed, and *redesign* instruction more intentionally. The *Activity Engagement Tool* (Figure 3), aligned with Berry's continuum, supported this reflection process and provided a framework for examining student engagement.

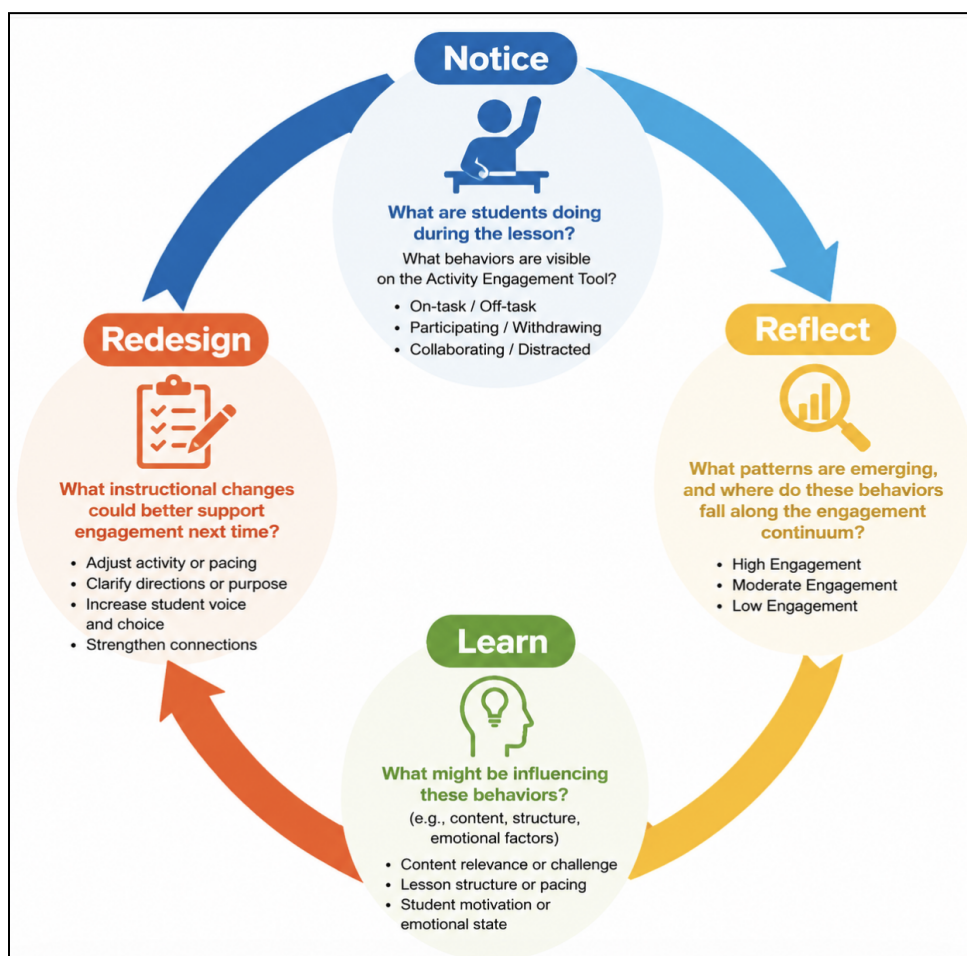
What made this process different was the shift from general impressions to specific evidence. Rather than saying a class felt engaged or disengaged, teachers could point to quantitative data of observable behaviors and consider where those behaviors fell along the continuum.

This work was further supported by professional learning around trauma-informed practices and resilience-infused instructional approaches, which helped teachers better interpret what they were seeing and respond more intentionally.

Teachers used a four-step reflection cycle to guide their instructional decisions:

- **Notice:** What are students doing during the lesson? What behaviors are visible on the Activity Engagement Tool?
- **Reflect:** What patterns are emerging, and where do these behaviors fall along the engagement continuum?
- **Learn:** What might be influencing these behaviors (e.g., content, structure, emotional factors)?
- **Redesign:** What instructional changes could better support engagement next time?

Figure 2 *Reflection Cycle*



Note. Created by author.

Activity Engagement Tool

Dr. Pittman developed the *Activity Engagement Tool* (Figure 3) as a classroom observation instrument grounded in Amy Berry's *Continuum of Engagement*. While Berry's continuum provides a conceptual framework for understanding varying levels of student engagement, the Activity Engagement Tool operationalizes the framework by translating each level of engagement into observable student behaviors that can be documented during classroom instruction. This adaptation was designed to provide educators with a practical, teacher-friendly instrument they can use efficiently in the fast-paced classroom.

The tool enables teachers to collect real-time observational data on student engagement during authentic learning experiences. Rather than relying on teacher perceptions after instruction, the instrument focuses on specific, observable student behaviors that align with each level of the engagement continuum. For example, behaviors such as attempting to leave the classroom during instruction or side conversations may be classified as indicators of avoiding engagement. By emphasizing observable behaviors rather than subjective interpretations, the tool supports more consistent classroom observations and reflection.

As part of the reflection cycle process, participating teachers selected a classroom activity or lesson during which they would conduct their observations. Activities varied according to instructional

context and included lab investigations, learning stations, independent practice, note-taking, collaborative learning, and other instructional formats. During the selected lesson, teachers used the *Activity Engagement Tool* to record each observed engagement behavior by placing a tally mark beside the corresponding behavioral indicator whenever it occurred. This provided educators with quantitative data to support their instructional decisions.

After each observation, teachers analyzed behavior frequency across the engagement continuum to identify patterns of student engagement and disengagement in their classrooms. The engagement category with the greatest number of observed behaviors was identified as the teacher's area of focus for the first reflection cycle. Teachers then designed and implemented instructional interventions intended to increase engagement within that category. For example, if observations indicated that students most frequently exhibited behaviors associated with avoiding engagement, the teacher selected and implemented strategies specifically aimed at reducing avoidant behaviors and promoting greater participation during subsequent lessons. This data-informed process is aligned with the iterative nature of the reflection cycle, allowing teachers to use systematic classroom observations to guide instructional improvement and evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions over time. While this was used in a middle school setting, this *Activity Engagement Tool* can be used or adapted to any educational learning environment.

Figure 3 Activity Engagement Tool

Lesson Activity Engagement Tool					
Check all that apply; star ★ the most common category that you observed					
Disrupting (Active) Active Disengagement: Seeking control through noise or conflict.	Avoiding (Passive) Active Disengagement: Trying to look busy or escape the task.	Withdrawing (Passive) Passive Disengagement: Trying to become invisible.	Participating (Passive) Passive Engagement: Doing exactly what is told, but no more.	Investing (Active) These are the behaviors that show a student has shifted from "student" to "learner."	Driving (Active) Active Engagement: Taking responsibility for the outcome.
☒ ☐ Attention-seeking ☐ Interrupts or derails instruction ☐ Argues with teacher or peers ☐ Sabotages materials or tasks ☐ Polices peers ☐ Talks Loudly ☐ Using humor or jokes to derail	☐ Tries to escape the task or classroom ☐ Off-task behavior ☐ Fake working ☐ Stares at paper/screen with no progress ☐ Incomplete work ☐ Side Conversations	☐ Head down, sleeping, or silent ☐ No eye contact; physically turned away ☐ Separates from group ☐ Can't repeat what was said	☐ Only responds when called on ☐ Completes tasks exactly as asked ☐ Tracks the speaker ☐ Does the work, not the thinking ☐ Asks, "Is this for a grade?" ☐ Doing just enough ☐ Minimal creative	☐ Asks unprompted questions ☐ Shows visible interest ("aha" moments) ☐ Goes slightly beyond requirements ☐ Makes connections to prior learning ☐ Spends extra time due to interest	☐ Sets personal goals for the task ☐ Seeks feedback to improve work ☐ Self-assesses using criteria or rubric ☐ Leads other peers ☐ Proposal new ideas ☐ Advocates for Choices

Note. Created by author.

What Teachers Actually Saw

As teachers began using the *Activity Engagement Tool*, patterns quickly emerged, especially among students operating in the avoiding and withdrawing ranges of the continuum. These patterns were especially noticeable in middle grades classrooms, where students are developing independence while still needing strong relational and instructional support. These patterns included students appearing to work while doing very little meaningful thinking, engaging in off-task conversations, leaving work incomplete, avoiding eye contact, or physically withdrawing by putting their heads down or trying to go unnoticed.

Seeing these behaviors documented in a structured way helped teachers recognize that disengagement is not a single, uniform experience. It presents differently across students, and often in ways that are easy to overlook without deliberate observation.

How Teacher Thinking Changed

Before engaging in this process, many teachers equated engagement with participation, compliance, or following classroom rules and procedures. Over time, that understanding deepened as teachers began to distinguish between surface-level participation and deeper investment. After

their professional development, teachers started to consider the emotional dimensions of engagement, such as whether students felt safe, connected, and found joy and ownership in their learning. Or whether students were cognitively engaged, demonstrating deep understanding, connection, and transfer of learning. What initially appeared to be disengagement often revealed itself as something more complex, an indicator of unmet needs rather than a lack of effort.

Seeing Behavior Through a New Lens

Adopting a trauma-informed lens sparked one of the most vital transformations. Teachers participated in a one-hour training session exploring how trauma influences brain development and learning, and how these impacts manifest in the classroom. Instead of asking why a student was not motivated, teachers began asking what the student might be experiencing. Educators examine the significance of recognizing fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses within a classroom setting. Furthermore, they explore the consequences when students operate from their "downstairs brain" instead of their "upstairs brain," noting how a deactivated prefrontal cortex can lead to behaviors commonly mistaken for disengagement (Souers & Hall, 2016). Behaviors communicate a signal of an unmet need. This can be emotional, relational, physical, or control (Souers & Hall, 2018). This reframing changed how behaviors were interpreted. Students who appeared to be avoiding work were sometimes "playing school" without fully understanding the content, while those who withdrew were often responding to stress, lack of relevance, or external challenges.

In one instance, a teacher identified a student who consistently disengaged during instruction. Through reflection, the teacher

recognized contributing factors such as home stress and a lack of connection to the content. This realization led to intentional changes, including more consistent check-ins, stronger relationship-building, and increased attention to emotional safety. Over time, these shifts improved participation and strengthened classroom culture.

What Changed in Planning

As teachers moved through the reflection cycle, their lesson planning became more intentional and responsive. Planning began to center not only on content, but also on students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral needs.

Teachers incorporated more opportunities for student voice and choice, created stronger connections between content and students' experiences, and paid closer attention to how lessons were structured from beginning to end. The focus shifted from evaluating whether a lesson worked to understanding how students engaged and what adjustments were needed next.

Strategies That Made a Difference

As teachers moved beyond compliance, several intentional instructional shifts led to noticeable increases in student engagement. These strategies drew on both classroom observation and research on adolescent motivation.

One important instructional shift involved increasing student voice and choice. Teachers implemented choice boards that allowed students to demonstrate their learning in multiple ways, such as through writing, visual design, or oral presentations. While student voice and choice have broad benefits across educational settings, they are particularly significant in trauma-informed

classrooms. Students who have experienced trauma often feel a loss of control or power in their lives, and providing meaningful choices helps restore a sense of agency and ownership over their learning (Spiritos School, 2025). This flexibility also made learning tasks more accessible, engaging, and relevant for a diverse range of learners. Research further supports this approach, demonstrating that adolescents are more motivated when learning experiences foster autonomy, competence, pride, and respect (Yeager, 2024). By intentionally incorporating opportunities for student input and choice, teachers created learning environments that better supported both students' developmental needs and their emotional well-being.

Teachers also worked to make learning more relevant to students' lives. Teachers redesigned lessons to connect with student interests, current events, or real-world applications. When students saw personal meaning in the content, they were more likely to invest effort and engage more deeply.

Beyond instructional shifts, teachers intentionally focused on the classroom environment and emotional climate. Some incorporated positive music during work time to create a more welcoming and focused atmosphere. Others implemented brief, predictable daily routines, such as asking students to share something positive happening in their lives and having calming fidgets available (Bethell et al., 2014). These practices helped shift student mindsets and created a stronger sense of community.

Teachers also began using daily emotional check-ins to better understand students' readiness to learn. These check-ins provided insight into student experiences and allowed teachers to respond more intentionally to both academic and emotional needs.

Finally, teachers found that giving students meaningful responsibility significantly increased engagement. Assigning roles, leadership opportunities, or ownership over parts of the learning process helped students feel trusted and capable. This aligns with research suggesting that students are constantly asking themselves whether the authority figures around them believe in their competence (Yeager, 2024). When students feel respected and capable, they are more likely to engage fully in their learning.

What Teachers Learned About Engagement

Amy Berry's Levels of Engagement Continuum (2022) provided teachers with a shared language for discussing the behaviors they observed in their classrooms. More importantly, it helped educators recognize that student engagement exists along a continuum rather than fitting into a single category. Integrating the continuum into the Activity Engagement Tool enabled teachers to identify, interpret, and respond to patterns of student engagement during instruction more accurately.

As teachers implemented changes to their instructional practices, student engagement did not increase immediately. Instead, growth was gradual and varied across students, with the most significant improvements observed among those who received intentional support. This process reinforced an important realization: meaningful improvements in engagement occur when teachers respond to what they observe in the moment rather than relying solely on what they originally planned. Observation, reflection, and instructional adjustment became part of an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement rather than a one-time intervention. Through this experience, teachers also developed a deeper

understanding of the complexity of student engagement, recognizing that it is dynamic, multifaceted, and influenced by instructional, environmental, and emotional factors rather than existing as a simple, one-dimensional concept.

Areas for Continued Growth

While many students showed movement toward participating and investing, supporting students in reaching the “driving” level of engagement remains an area for continued growth. This level requires structures that allow students to take greater ownership of their learning, including opportunities for goal setting, self-assessment, and student-led work.

Why This Matters for Teachers

This work reinforces an important idea: engagement is not the same as compliance. This distinction is especially important in middle grades classrooms, where students are navigating increasing independence while still needing strong instructional and relational support. When students are disengaged, they are often communicating something about their needs, their experiences, or the learning environment itself.

By grounding reflection in observable evidence, teachers can better understand those signals and respond in ways that are more intentional and effective. Even small shifts in lesson planning can lead to meaningful changes over time.

Perhaps most importantly, this process positions teachers as decision-makers, professionals who can study their own classrooms, interpret what they see, and adapt their practice accordingly.

Final Thought

When teachers combine a clear framework for understanding engagement with a structured approach to reflection, they move beyond simply noticing student behavior. They begin designing learning experiences that support deeper thinking, stronger connections, and greater student ownership. That shift has the potential to significantly impact both teaching practice and student learning.

Quick Start: Small Shifts Teachers Can Try Tomorrow to Boost Engagement

- Offer structured choice: Give students 2–3 options for how they demonstrate learning
- Start with a daily emotional check-in: Use a quick scale (1–5), emoji, or one-word response
- Incorporate positive routines: Ask students to share one positive thing
- Use music intentionally: Play low-volume, instrumental music during work time
- Connect content to student interests: Begin with relevant questions or scenarios
- Assign meaningful roles: Discussion leader, connector, summarizer
- Pause and reflect during lessons: Are students thinking or just completing?

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