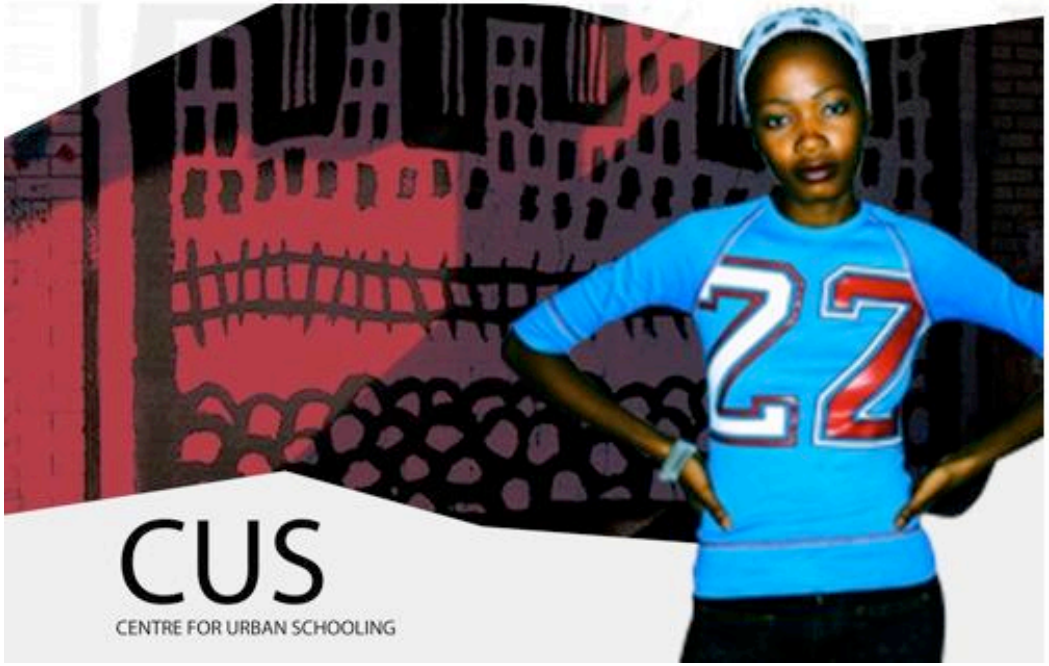
TOWARDS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



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The Thread

There was this thread
That kept unraveling in my head
A silky strong string of connectivity
So simple in its workability
That I think it startled me.

This thread in my head
Was spooled
Around ideas of school
And of teachers
And of the present arrangement
Of student engagement

Today's conversations and deliberations
Inspired a desire
For this practitioner-poet
To put pen to paper
And let my wrist
Swish about
And twist out
Some of the words I heard
About school
And about teachers
And about redefining the present arrangement
Of student engagement.

Just as important
As any curriculum task
Are some crucial questions
We teachers need to ask.
Questions like are my students comfortable?
Are they laughing?
Are they doing some of the asking?
Are they demanding
Complete understanding
Regardless of their ages,
If they notice their textbooks
Not reflecting their looks
In any of the pages?

My thread of thought
Got caught
And tangled
And even a little enraged
About how
We've allowed
Our kids to become so disengaged.

We are definitely living our days
In an i pod
Apple god world
That offers daily upgrades
On ways
To keep us ear-budded
And interfacing
Completely erasing the need
For you to stand next to me
'Cause you could just send a text to me.
Soon no one will see eye to eye
Because we don't see face to face.

So turned off
By the traditional notions
Of what and how they are learning
Their disinterest means
That we should be turning our heads
To what *is* keeping them stimulated
And invigorated
And mesmerized
And energized.

It's clear to my eyes
That we should be using some of ***that***
To shape the kind of minds
That will in time
Run the world.

This thread in my head
Completely agrees with Malcolm
When he said
That the media was the most
Powerful of entities
Sometimes fronting like a deity
Because of the way
It controls the minds of the masses.
And if you believe that to be true
Then you know
Just as well as I do,
That we should be using the media to teach our classes.

Perhaps for some
It may come
As bittersweet truth
But we ***must*** use
Other avenues
To stimulate our youth.

Have we created safe places
And open spaces
For our kids to interact and relate?
Have we looked around and found
Reasons for them to turn the volume down
And really communicate?

We need to ignite our students
And excite our students
Give them
Access to success
That is holistic and realistic
Artistic and idealistic.

And if I
Can identify
Ways to use hip-hop
To stop
The blank stares
And the “I don’t cares”
And if I choose
To recycle and reuse
Rhythms, beats and rhymes of the times
And from it they learn how to be critical
And analytical
And political
If this is a way to bridge that chasm
And spark natural enthusiasm
Why wouldn’t I try?

If using ideas and thoughts
From outside the box
Will get our kids to
Reprise and summarize
Metaphors and puns
Discuss the poetic assonance
In the setting of suns
And get them to understand similes
And personification…
Just think of what it would do
For the life of education.

As I got to the end
Of my school spool of thread
With strategies and possibilities
Still billowing in my head
I knew that the poem I would write
Would emphasize the need
To take heed
Of these best practice conversations
That we need to stand and deliver
And reconsider
Some of our current indoctrinations.
§

Michelle Muir (a.k.a. Nuff Said), teacher and spoken-word artist, was commissioned by the Centre for Urban Schooling to write “The Thread”, based on her experiences at the Redefining Student Engagement *Symposium*.

Understandings of Student Engagement: A General Overview

In the last two decades, the concept of student engagement has received increased attention in the academic research literature, namely within the fields of psychology, social psychology and sociology of education. In this literature, three types of approaches to student engagement can be identified: behavioural engagement (Finn, 1993; and Finn & Rock, 1997), emotional engagement (see Brady, 2005), and cognitive or academic engagement (Blount Morse, Anderson, Christenson & Lehr, 2004). Many studies of engagement include one or two of these types, but rarely all three. Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004) suggest that to date, research has not capitalized on the potential of engagement as a multidimensional construct that involves behaviour, emotion *and* cognition.

Moreover, some researchers/theorists argue that student engagement should be reconceptualized as a school outcome in its own right, in addition to being important to all other positive school outcomes (Smyth, 2005; Brady, 2005; Willms, 2004). Brady (2005) suggests that in order to succeed in school, students must attempt to master two types of linked curricula: the one mandated by the education authorities, and the "hidden" or "corridor" curriculum of engagement, which occurs through informal daily interactions with administrators, teachers, peers, and others. Significantly for the Centre for Urban Schooling's purposes, the literature generally does not examine the influence of the classroom and other contextual factors on the different types of engagement. Thus, at a conceptual level, it is less clear what "student engagement" means, and how to best describe its particular realities in a meaningful way. In this report, we discuss one way in which to address this issue. This requires that we first take a look at the overall context of education in Canada.

Student Engagement and Schooling in the Canadian Context

Canada prides itself on having a robust public education system. According to a recent UNICEF (2007) study, the country offers the second best educational opportunities to children and youth among the twenty-one OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. There are still some causes for concern, however. For example, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranks Canada much lower in relation to its counterparts. According to this study, more Canadian students have low levels of participation in school activities, than do students in the other OECD countries[1].

[1] While the average prevalence of low participation students among OECD countries was 20%, the prevalence for low participation students in Canada was 26% (Willms, 2003, p. 21).

At a more local level, it is becoming increasingly necessary for those who have been previously marginalized to be included in discussions about student engagement, given the situations currently being faced by schools and communities in Toronto. These include, but are not limited to: the fatal shooting of Jordan Manners at C.W Jefferys Collegiate Institute in May 2007; the subsequent document, *The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety* (School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008), which exposed the gravity and prevalence of school violence and the need for safer schools; and the deplorably high student drop-out/push-out rates of many visible minority/non-English language proficient student groups (Brown, 2006). In addition, the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Grade 9 Cohort Study (ibid.) documented the overall youth dropout rate at 21%, as compared to 25% for the province of Ontario (King, 2004).

These numbers only tell part of the story, however. While recent studies on student engagement use more inclusive definitions of the term (see Ferguson, 2005), a limitation of many of them is that they do not take into account the impact of systemic barriers to participation of the most vulnerable students; neither do they tell us how the power dynamics that are socially reproduced in schools affect marginalized students' sense of belonging or engagement within the overall school system. When we examine the number of youth dropping out of TDSB schools whose home language other than English, the numbers almost double for some groups. Students speaking Somali, Spanish, and Portuguese all reflect higher numbers of dropouts: roughly, 37%, 39% and 43% respectively (Brown, 2006). Additionally, English-speaking Caribbean students reflect a dropout rate of about 40% (Brown, 2006), indicating that issues other than language are coming to bear on this situation. This is particularly important because, by 2017, half of the population of Toronto (and also Vancouver) will be comprised of visible minorities (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). In these urban centres, almost half the core school-age population (ages 5 to 18) is comprised of immigrants and/or are considered visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2001). Although dropping out of school is a result of many events, with not one factor solely being the cause (Wayman, 2002), based on the number of dropouts that represent visible minority groups, we cannot afford to ignore this connection between student engagement and student marginalization.

As the above literature suggests, conventional – or "common sense" – understandings of student engagement do not go far enough. In fact, some researchers (McMahon & Portelli, 2004) argue that these understandings are problematic because they conceive of "engagement" in solely behavioural terms (e.g. teaching strategies or styles), presuppose its connection to academic achievement (e.g. as demonstrated by standardized test scores), and/or ignore important questions about the *purposes* of engagement (i.e. to what end? For whom? By whom?). It is the Centre for Urban Schooling's view that a new understanding of student engagement is needed; one that does not separate it from "…its

social, cultural and political contexts" (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 225). In other words, we believe that the terms of student engagement need to be *redefined*.

Redefining Student Engagement

The Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) is among the "key players" in the field of urban education research in Canada. Since its inception in 2005, CUS has been engaged in education research, consulting, and advocacy for some of Toronto's most underserved urban schools. The educators, researchers and activists affiliated with the Centre work collaboratively on education projects that challenge power relations based on class, race, gender, language, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and ability, as they are manifested in all aspects of education. In November 2007 at Hart House, University of Toronto, CUS held a two-day symposium on student engagement. Entitled *Redefining Student Engagement (RSE)*, it brought together local and international academics, educators, practitioners, policy makers - as well as youth, themselves – to discuss critical questions concerning student engagement.

It is CUS' position that "…there is no single policy nor practice nor technique that can somehow escape the ideological, so that we might justifiably speak of 'student engagement' […] in the abstract and absolute" (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 238). As such, a primary function of the symposium was to address the following questions, both through panel presentations and critical discussions with the audience:

- What "counts" as student engagement?
- What is at stake if student engagement doesn't matter?
- Why does student engagement need to be redefined?

Criteria

When the CUS Administrative Team first began developing *RSE*, we kept four main criteria in mind: 1) a wide range of participants; 2) highlighting the experiences of students and youth; 3) a broad understanding of "student engagement" that included both in-school and out-of-school contexts; and 4) using the symposium's proceedings to develop research projects and educational tools that would foster critical debate, and support school change in the area of student engagement.

1) Wide range of participants (both panelists and audience)

As part of our desire to foster dynamic, critical discussion about student engagement, we deliberately invited key stakeholders, as well as representatives from different education and youth engagement organizations, to be both panelists and audience-members at *RSE*. We also wanted to provide an international perspective on student engagement. Thus, the symposium's panelists and participants were comprised of:

- secondary school students, and youth who had already been through high school;
- university professors and researchers from different disciplines (e.g. Criminology, Education, Child and Youth Studies, Religious Studies), and different geographic contexts (e.g. Canada, England, India, France, USA);
- elementary and secondary school teachers, principals, and youth workers;
- teachers in alternative educational settings (e.g. Toronto's City Adult Learning Centre, Pathways to Education™ Regent Park);
- youth-led organizations (e.g. Schools Without Borders, Regent Park Focus Media Arts Centre);
- representatives from Provincial government ministries (e.g. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Child and Youth Services);
- teacher candidates, university students, and graduate students in Education

2) Mandatory Youth Perspectives

Given that the overall focus of *RSE* was on young peoples' experiences in/with schooling, it was important to us that everyone at the symposium heard their perspectives on student engagement. In particular, we wanted the audience to hear from people whose experiences of engagement with school were not necessarily positive: not so that their experiences would "stand in" for all students, but because such experiences are not usually given centre stage in adults' public discussions about students. Thus, we scheduled one mandatory session for each day of the symposium[2]. Both of these sessions were comprised of a panel of youth.

The youth on the first panel were in their early- to mid-twenties. They shared with us their experiences of (dis)engagement with the formal education system, and spoke candidly about the people, organizations, and/or services that have helped them to become successful, now that they are out of school. They also offered advice and recommendations for what *could* have helped them to become successful while they were still in school.

[2] As opposed to running concurrent sessions, which is how the rest of *RSE* was structured.

The youth on the second panel were current high school students: three of them attended "regular" secondary schools within the Toronto District School Board, and one attended an alternative TDSB high school for adult learners. They spoke about the positive relationships they had formed with peers, teachers, administrators and/or school-community workers: relationships that were making their journey through high school an engaging one. They were also quite frank about the barriers – both systemic and individual – in place at school that had previously kept them from fully engaging in their learning. As such, their recommendations for how schools needed to change in order to meet the educational needs of all youth were precise, concise, and necessitated a broader, more relational and less technocratic, view of education.

3) Holistic Understanding of Schooling and Student Engagement

When discussing the content of the Symposium's panels, we wanted to make sure that our panelists and audience members considered "student engagement" in as broad a manner as possible. In addition to traditional measures (e.g. retention rates, graduation rates, standardized test score rankings), we wanted people to think holistically about the ways in which student might be (dis)engaged from school. For example, what features of the surrounding community affect student's engagement levels? Does arts education provide a useful framework for looking at engagement? What about popular culture? How does students' identification with multiple identity categories influence how they engage with/in school?

4) Built-in Research Component

Finally, it was of the utmost importance to us that the outcomes of *RSE* were useful beyond those two days in November; as such, we created the position of *Symposium Eye*. An *Eye* was assigned to each session of the Symposium (including the two youth panels), and it was her/his job to take targeted notes during the presentations (see APPENDIX A for summaries of each presentation). Specifically, they were to use a type of "coding matrix" (see APPENDIX B) that allowed them to keep track of what each panelist said about the three key questions mentioned in the Introduction:

- What "counts" as student engagement?
- What is at stake if student engagement doesn't matter?
- Why does student engagement need to be redefined?

In addition to the *Symposium Eyes*, a graduate research assistant was assigned to each session. It was their job to listen closely to the panel presentations, as well as the comments and discussion during the Symposium Working Groups, and record what – if anything – was said about the economic, academic, social/civic, and educational implications of student

(dis)engagement. These two sets of fieldnotes have since been used to develop a multidimensional framework for student engagement. The process of this activity is described in the next section.

Towards a Multidimensional Framework…

Since the Symposium, a team of researchers and practitioners from CUS has been working with the data gathered from each session (namely, fieldnotes and video archives) in an attempt to generate a multidimensional framework for student engagement. The purpose of this framework is two-fold: 1) to continue the conversation – among multiple stakeholders and contexts – about the different forms, purposes, hindrances, and supports of student engagement; and 2) to provide school staff with a guideline for creating and maintaining the conditions in which students can be successfully engaged in their learning – both through formal schooling, and beyond. This work imagines student engagement (and education, in general), to be potentially transformative, in that it is "…not so much preparatory as urgent", and "take[s] up, examine[s] and work[s] on the world as it presents itself to students (and teachers) here and now" (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 228). This means, among other things, taking a view of "engagement" that is grounded in the lives and experiences of students.

Thus, based on the content of each panel session at the Symposium, our next step was to create a conceptual model that accounts for all of the intersecting, context-based processes that influence students' level of engagement in their learning. The model was created by critically examining the *Symposium Eyes'* and Graduate Assistants' notes. From this work, we were able to identify several themes in each session (see APPENDIX C for our "working notes"). For example: political dimensions (macro and micro); students' lived experiences; youth voice; and holistic, relational, or arts-based perspectives of student engagement. We then reorganized the sessions into six, interconnected, domains of student engagement, each of which reflected the themes of the sessions:

- Community and Neighbourhood Dynamics
- Parent and Family Connections[3]
- Relationships with Peers
- Education Policies and Assessment

[3] We note that this particular theme was absent (though not completely) from the discussion of student engagement during the *Symposium*. It was only through our subsequent analysis of the *Symposium* data, as well as our research and professional development work on the topic of parent engagement in schools, that we were able to clearly articulate its importance.

- School Culture and Environment
- Curriculum, Pedagogy and Classroom Culture

The model below represents our current understanding of the relationships among these domains. The ”I am a student” circle in the middle indicates the multiple aspects of students’ lived experiences in schools (and in the world, more generally). The six domains (expressed as blue rectangles) to the left and right of the circle both shape – and are shaped by – those lived experiences. For example, the relationships a student has with her/his parents or family members has an influence on their psychological “readiness” for school. Reciprocally, students’ psychological experiences at school influence how they relate to their parents/family members.

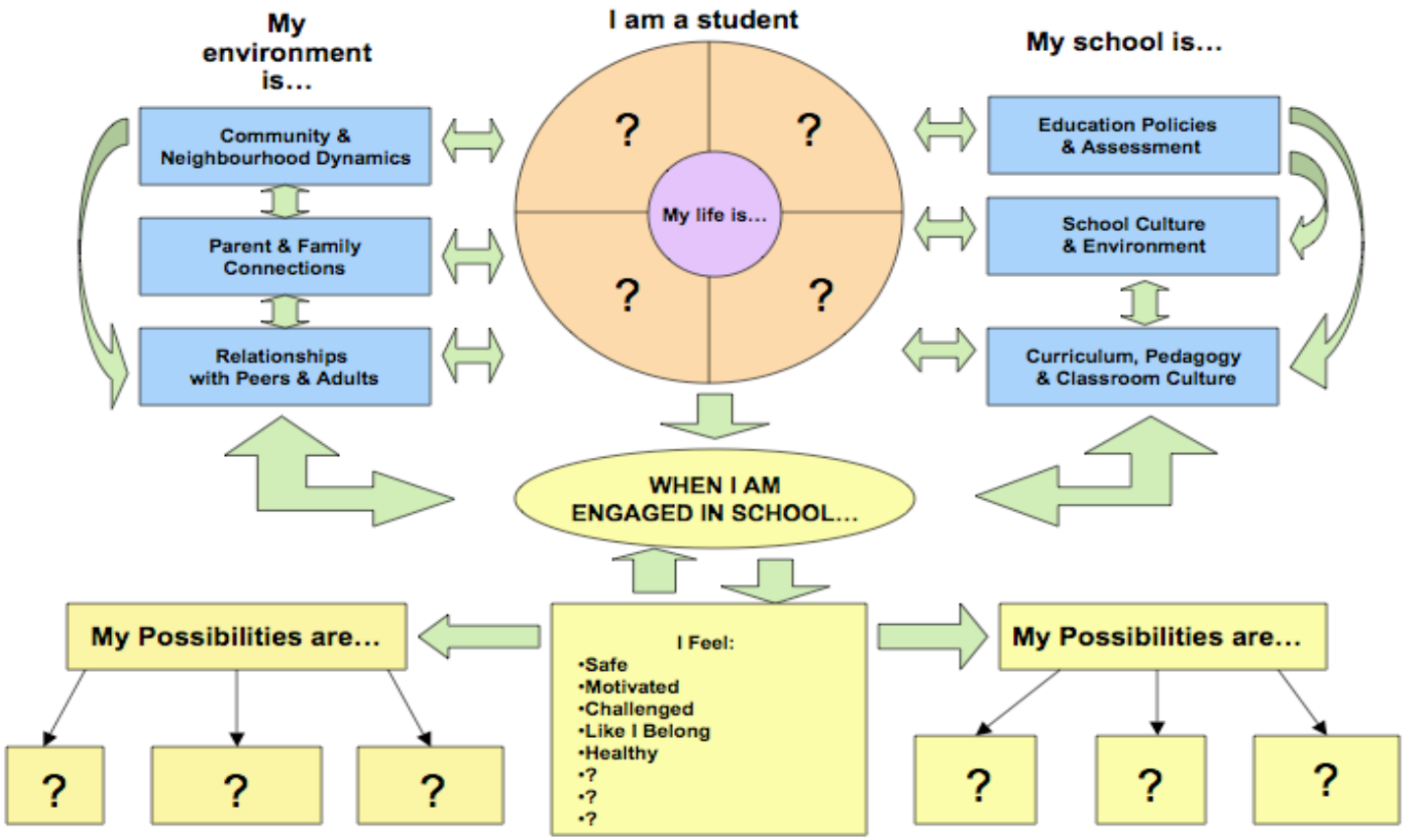
Not only do the six domains have a reciprocal relationship with students’ lives, they also have a reciprocal relationship with each other.[4] For example, the relationship a student has with her/his family is affected by the dynamics within their community: Are they in an isolated rural area, or a dense urban one? Is the average household income above or below the poverty line? Does the student have a full time, part time or after school job? Is there a school within walking distance, or does the student need to find alternative modes of transportation? Is that transportation free? And so on…

We deliberately left parts of the model incomplete, because we wanted to indicate that this work is still “in progress”. We also wanted to leave room for students, in particular, to manipulate the elements of the model in ways that make sense to them. It is for this reason that, in APPENDIX D, we have included blank versions of the model, as well. We hope that students will fill it out according to *their* understandings of student engagement and its possibilities, and then share their models with others.

Taken together, we intend this model to represent the *processes* that can foster Student Engagement (the yellow oval), through the development of a relationship between engagement and students’ personal, emotional and social lives (the yellow square). The *outcomes/possibilities* of this relationship (the yellow rectangles) in this framework, then, can be personal, economic, civic, cultural, academic, etc.

[4] One exception is the relationship between “Education Policies & Assessment”, and “School Culture & Environment”. At this moment in education in Ontario, we feel that the relationship between these two domains is rather top-down. CUS envisions a more reciprocal relationship between these two domains in the future, and is committed to helping make that future a reality.

Processes & Possibilities of Student Engagement



Six Interconnected Domains for Fostering Student Engagement: Some Questions to Think About
Each of the six domains also has several key areas that, we argue, foster student engagement.

1) Community and Neighbourhood Dynamics:

- Do schools open up spaces for students to discuss the issues that affect their community, as well as provide opportunities for students to get involved in community advocacy, as part of their curriculum?
- Do schools reach out to the community, and establish collaborations with community agencies whose mandates include serving school-age children, youth, and their parents?
- Are teachers and school administrators provided with the tools to become aware of existing demographic trends in their school's neighbourhood?
- Are teachers and administrators equipped with the knowledge and strategies to fight against stereotypes and assumptions about the students who live in a particular community?
- Are the relationships between community organizations and the school based on equity? Are the relationships reciprocal?

"As young people, we come from a different generation and a different context: there's certain things that we just intrinsically understand and know and if we can create a space for young people to explore that more and really connect with that, and give them a venue to communicate that, you're gonna see crazy, crazy, crazy beautiful things happen in the city." – Chris Kang, *Schools Without Borders*

2) Parent and Family Connections:

- If there is no supportive parent in a student's life, does the school look for services to allow another adult (e.g. family member, legal guardian, community advocate[5]) to act in the student's best interests?

"But what's most striking was the way that the kids talked about their admiration for mothers and tie their mothers' value to education. So what Caesar puts in the description of his mom, I think if you go next, yeah, by saying that, "I took a picture of my mom because I admire her. She comes from a long line of intelligence." He explains that his mother came from Columbia and has worked hard since she arrived raising her 3 children and getting a good job. He said that he didn't know how she's managed to do all these while still "being there all the time" and cooking his favourite meals of chicken and rice." – Dr. Wendy Luttrell, *Harvard Graduate School of Education*

- Are schools able to recognize both the small- and large-scale political effects that shape P/F/A involvement (e.g. changes in labour law, housing policy, job restructuring/outsourcing, immigration policy, market fluctuations, etc.)?
- Are P/F/As consulted on key aspects of a students' school life? Are P/F/As involved in key decisions that directly affect students' school experiences?
- Is the communication between teachers/administrators and P/F/As respectful and validating? Are the forms of this communication invitational, accessible, multilingual and timely?
- Does the school honour P/F/As as an educational resource, by valuing their personal and/or professional knowledge of the student? Does the school use innovative outreach strategies to make P/F/As feel welcome?

[5] For the purposes of this report, we use the abbreviation "P/F/A", for Parent/Family/Advocate.

3) Relationships with Peers and Adults

- Does the school provide students with opportunities to participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities that allow them to "engage the school"?
- Does the school understand the value of social and/or romantic relationships among youth? These can be a key factor in keeping students engaged in school.
- How does the school support students' meaningful engagement with others who have different life experiences?
- How does the school create opportunities for students to form positive peer relationships?
- How does the school create opportunities for students to form positive adult relationships, in the school and surrounding community?
- Does the school provide supportive adults to help reintegrate students who have chosen to go back to school? Does the school provide opportunities for current students to help returning students make the transition back into school?

"Each individual student, they grow up and they find out what kind of person they wanna be. And, you know, from personal experience, I think clearly that majority of the people around me weren't very good people. I didn't have a lot of good experiences in school, with my family and with my friends. So for the first part of my life, I chose to be a bad person. [But] since I've come into recovery, I've met a lot good people, especially at the school that I'm going to now. It made me wanna change my life." – Mishayla Vandenheuvel, *TDSB student*

4) Education Policies and Assessment

"You know, not all students respond to extrinsic motivation. They don't always respond to the rewards and the diplomas and the recognition. We need to get at their intrinsic motivation. They have to care about what they're doing … [T]hey need to know that that we're interested in where they're at and where they want to go, that we care about them." – Melanie Parrack, *Executive Superintendent for School Success, TDSB*

- Do the policies that relate to student engagement reflect a broader definition of student engagement that is not limited to academic success, or to a narrow vision of curriculum?
- Are these policies designed in collaboration with all stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, administrators, families, community members, etc.)?

- How do they address how changing the definition of student engagement can have an impact on the definition of teacher responsibilities?

Does the school's assessment of student engagement:

- evolve from relying solely on traditional measures (e.g. test scores, drop out rates, etc.) to include new indicators (e.g. sense of belonging, student leadership, relationships, etc.)?
- encourage growth to occur from mistakes?
- define and address short and long term goals?
- identify gaps between policy and practice?
- include aspects of students' lives found outside of educational institutions?

5) School Culture and Environment

- How do schools reflect institutionalized discrimination (e.g. racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, etc.)? How do they respond, practically, to it? Does the school promote a culture in which both students *and* teachers can work together to talk about how to address these issues, and monitor their progress in making school-wide changes towards equity? What role does strong school leadership play in this development?
- How do we ensure that the policies and practices of schooling (e.g. collective agreements, the curriculum, staffing models, time-tabling, programming, supervision time, etc.) are flexible and innovative to meet the needs of all students (but especially those who are not well-served by conventional schooling practices)? How do the Ministry of Education, teachers' unions and school boards work together to achieve this goal?

"Some students are dropping out of school because they need to support themselves. I didn't really see that as a classroom teacher. Now that I'm in this program, it's incredible. These are not lazy students. These are students who are trying to survive, and it's incredible once you give them the opportunity what they can accomplish." – John Giustini, *Continuous Intake Co-op Program, TCSB*

- In what ways is the school a safe space where students can connect to their own identities, and build a foundation of confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness?

- What is in place in the school to ensure the physical and psychological health of its students? Are there physically safe and aesthetically pleasing spaces to learn and spend time in? Are there natural light, proper ventilation, open spaces, and warm, inviting colours? Is the equipment (e.g. computers, athletic gear, art materials, and other media technology) in the school kept as current as possible?

6) Curriculum, Pedagogy and Classroom Culture

- Does the school have a broadly defined definition of "curriculum", which includes formal, hidden, symbolic and media curricula? Is the curriculum culturally responsive in both content and pedagogy? How is this developed and sustained?

"It seems like we can't talk about passion, we can't talk about feelings 'cause you gotta follow the curriculum. I think it's really good to talk about those things, and if you need to step up and be an advocate for your person or find another colleague of yours that you guys can do the work together. I think that would be a testament to what engaging a student is about because it includes not just them as a student, but them as a person, as a young person, as a member of the community, as a brother, a sister, as all the other--'cause when we come into classroom, we don't just come into classrooms as students. … As you come into classroom, there's a whole bunch of other people and I think because we keep denying those other identities, we often clash." – Tonika Morgan, *Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre, Toronto*

- Are the lived experiences of students, including family and community, valued parts of what is taught and talked about in the classroom?

- Are issues of social justice, including anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-sexism, ableism, and anti-homophobia, central to the classroom curriculum in the broadest sense, thereby ensuring the development of critical-thinking skills for all? Does the curriculum encourage a social justice perspective? In what ways?

- What opportunities for professional development in equity, social justice education, and student engagement are provided to teachers and administrators? If not, what alternatives do the school and/or district seek out?

- Do teachers have high and realistic expectations for their students? Is the curriculum and program academically rigorous? Does it allow for broad definitions of "success" for all students? What strategies are in place to ensure this on an on-going basis?

- Do teachers teach to the specific interests, learning styles and abilities of all students in the classroom? Are there support mechanisms in place to support teachers in accomplishing this?

- Is the curriculum presented in ways that integrate materials and subjects so that students are able to see the whole, rather than only seeing things in isolation? Do teachers collaborate in making this possible? Does the school support teachers with the time to plan and implement this kind of programming?

- Is the curriculum participatory, experimental and experiential? Does it encourage student participation in its development and implementation? How is this ensured? Does the curriculum encourage learning through doing, especially through doing things together that make a difference in the world?

- Are there mechanisms in place that allow and encourage students to become involved in decision-making, in both the classroom and school? Are these decision-making mechanisms equitable? That is, are they student-centred, or are they staff-driven? Is the power to make decisions concentrated within a particular group – or groups of – students? Or, is it distributed more evenly?

Many schools in Toronto, across the province, and around the country are successfully engaging their students on several, if not all, of the domains listed above. Yet, we hope that these questions provide a useful beginning for reflecting upon how they can continue to foster the engagement of their students, while also examining their current practices and seeking out new possibilities. We understand that this is not easy work. Carefully examining what we do in order to find ways to do it differently is a long and difficult process. The questions posed above are designed help to ignite, or to sustain, the process of creating change for disengaged students. We recognize that, in order to achieve this goal, teachers and schools must be provided with the necessary resources and supports.

It is also important to recognize that the work of student engagement must be an on-going process, which constantly adapts to the micro and macro forces that affect students' personal lives and their psycho-emotional needs, the educational policies that direct the practices of schools, the post-school opportunities available to students, the nature and form of teachers' work, and so on. Finally, we must remember that fostering student engagement is not the responsibility of schools, alone. As was made abundantly clear in *The Road to Health* (School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008), creating safe and healthy schools that support the academic and social successes of all their students requires a concerted effort from the education, government, social, legal, and economic sectors. The final section of this report addresses how the Centre for Urban Schooling plans to contribute to this process.

Conclusion: Our Next Steps

"[The] question for me becomes engagement in what, and for what, right? I mean you know, people talk about engaging teachers, that's what we need, engaging teachers. Let's be careful though, engaging in what and for what? Let us not forget: [James] Keegstra, in Alberta twenty years ago, was a very engaging teacher. But what was he engaging the students in? Making them believe in the denial of the Holocaust." (John P. Portelli, Associate Professor, OISE; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

The above quotation speaks to the heart of the matter of student engagement: it is relational, and context-dependent. As the symposium participants highlighted, there is no "one size fits all" student experience of schooling. Thus, there is no "one size fits all" approach to successfully engaging students in their learning. In fact, as Vibert & Shields (2003) noted, "...'student engagement' itself may well be a misnomer, suggesting that engagement is somehow located in students, when in fact analyses of the data we collected argued that students, like teachers and community members, are engaged in schools when *schools are engaging places to be*" (p. 236, emphasis added).

Schools are not neutral places: they can just as easily *dis*engage students, as engage them. This suggests that student engagement must be constantly negotiated among students, their families and advocates, teachers, community members, and the decision-makers in education. *Redefining Student Engagement*, and the resulting *Framework*, is the Centre for Urban Schooling's first step in renegotiating the terms of "student engagement" and, significantly, the various tools used to identify and understand it. We have also begun developing an online "wiki space" (www.oise.utoronto.ca/rse), which includes QuickTime™ video clips of the panel presentations, and podcasts from the entire symposium. There is also a space for students and youth to share their perspectives about education, achievement and engagement, through blogs,

videos, interviews, articles and, importantly, their versions of the student engagement model developed for this report. As our student engagement work progresses, the wiki space will be updated.

CUS also intends to develop an innovative research agenda for exploring the complexities of student engagement in its various contexts. We have already begun this process, with a proposed collaborative article on using the symposium as a research tool for identifying and communicating key concepts about a given issue. We hope to use the ideas developed through this paper to inform our future research on student engagement.

We will also produce a "scale" of student engagement, which will be developed from the "questions to think about" section above. We hope that both educational researchers and practitioners will find the scale useful in helping them reflect upon student engagement in the schools where they work. As a complement to this scale, CUS will create professional development opportunities for schools that have identified a particular domain (or domains) as being important to the engagement of all their students. This is part of our on-going work in building teachers' capacity to foster and sustain their desired changes for social justice in their schools.

CUS looks forward to continuing the conversation about *redefining student engagement*, and we hope that you will join us!

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APPENDIX A: Summaries of Symposium Panel Presentations

November 8th, 2007 - *Keynote Speaker: Dr. Lois Weis*

"How can we use engagement to press both toward individual economic outcomes and increased investments in communities under siege? Both links need to be thought about, it seems to me. Engagement just to make secondary school a better place in which to survive is good, but not good enough. Engagement must translate into movement through the pipeline. And this means academics, in some sense as traditionally defined, because as some people move through, they have to get that stuff. They have to be able to go to the next level."
(Lois Weis; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

Dr. Weis is the State University of New York Distinguished Professor of Sociology of Education at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. She is the author and/or editor of numerous books and articles relating to race, class, gender, education and the economy. Her presentation brought a macro perspective to the issue of student engagement, by urging the audience to think about the implications for educational policies and practices of current changes in the labour market, and large-scale social and economic restructuring. Within this context, Dr. Weis outlined three main points for a broader conceptualization of what student engagement might mean:

- An evolving set of international economic and human resource relations inevitably effects educational aspirations and apathies (e.g. the degree of engagement with school of younger generations in the countries that export jobs, and in the countries that import them).

- While students' academic (dis)engagement in secondary school is important, what matters for their long-term academic, social, economic, and civic engagement is how they live as adults in relation to who they were in high school.

- Many of the students who come to North America for better opportunities (e.g. as migrants, immigrants and/or refugees) are now being positioned as the new "model minorities". This positioning takes place in direct contrast to lower-performing native-born minoritized students. This has tremendous implications for conceptualizing student engagement, in terms of how educators perceive the abilities of the new "model" students through their own understandings of the minoritized students they already have.

Session 1 – Inside and Out: Students' Lives Beyond School Walls

> *"So I guess one of the questions that we're interested in, as an organization, is when does real learning happen? Does it happen in the classroom? Does it happen at home? Does it happen on the street? And so on, and so forth... And truly and honestly, we believe that it happens everywhere that is fun, comfortable, where people feel included, where they feel like they're able to be themselves."*
> (Chris Kang, Co-founder, Schools Without Borders; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

This session considered students' sense of self and leadership in the contexts of extracurricular activities. It also focused on the complexities that young people encounter in the process of constructing and defining their identities inside and beyond the school walls. There were four panelists, each of whom addressed different approaches to engaging students outside of school: Chris Kang (*Schools Without Borders*), Rita Mammone and John Giustini (*Continuous Intake Co-Operative Program, Toronto Catholic District School Board*), Ainsworth Morgan (*Pathways to Education, Regent Park*), Scot Wortley (*Department of Criminology, University of Toronto*). The overall themes of this session included the interaction between students' self-esteem and their levels of engagement in school, how to create student/youth-focused programs that held them to high expectations, while also providing flexible routes, and whether or not student engagement – as a concept – necessarily focused on the present, or on the future.

Session 2 – Student Engagement: Quality Indicators and Implications for Public Policy

> *"We have a series of indicators that we are responding to, that involve graduation rates, and reduction in early school leavers, credit accumulation… But if you don't fit into the norm, if you are threatened by the school environment and you need to seek an alternative setting, if you're a 55-percent achiever and all of a sudden, due to the fabulous interventions of the school, you now become a 65 percent student… You're not 90 or 80 percent [but] where is that celebrated? How is it recognized?"*
> (Melanie Parrack, Superintendent for Student Success, Toronto District School Board; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

This session focused on the myriad ways of conceptualizing student engagement, and the policy implications of doing so. Bruce Ferguson (*Sick Kids Hospital, Toronto*), Merrill Matthews (*Ottawa-Carleton District School Board*), Dennis Thiessen (*Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, OISE*), and Melanie Parrack (*Student Success, Toronto District School Board*) discussed where we are right now, in terms of successfully engaging students in their learning, the existing policies for fostering student engagement, and whether or not those policies are addressing some of the factors that might lead to student disengagement. The panelists spoke from their various positions as a school administrator (Merrill), a school board Superintendent (Melanie), an educational researcher (Dennis), and clinical researcher (Bruce).

The themes of their conversation, and the audience's responses, were centred around whether or not student engagement was a "process" or a "product", how schools could involve students in decision-making, and the nature of those decisions, whether or not student engagement takes different forms, and how those different forms might be recognized.

Session 3 – Relevant Pedagogies: Troubling Identities and Diverse Classrooms

"Student engagement is much more than teaching strategies and participation. It is a way of being that grounds the curriculum and pedagogy in students' real experience – individual, academic and political – with all the eceptions and contradictions and so on, and in equity and social justice." (John Portelli, Professor, OISE; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2008)

David Gillborn (*Institute of Education, University of London*), John Portelli (*Department of Theory and Policy Studies, OISE*), Wilma Verhagen (*Jesse Ketchum Public School, Toronto District School Board*), and Jeffrey White (*Triangle Program, Toronto District School Board*) discussed how teachers could use relevant pedagogies to build stronger relationships with their students and to challenge existing forms of exclusion. They also provided examples of current programs and initiatives that support students who deal with discrimination, homelessness, disabilities, or repetitive school failure. Recurring themes included: identifying barriers to school reform for student engagement; whether or not all students were equally at risk for disengaging from school; the ways in which student engagement is both observable and unobservable.

Session 4 – The Art of Student Engagement

"I believe that the arts provide opportunities to explore and interpret and react to a world that can seem distant and cruel and complicated. The arts help our young people develop a critical lens for that role, and the arts teach our youth that problems can have more than one solution. The arts, in addition, teach our youth to make good judgments about qualitative relationships… Unlike much of our curriculum, in which only correct answers and rules dominate, judgment counts in the arts. The arts provide another language, a way of working together, of bringing disparate people together and creating an experience that will be appreciated by others."
(Linda Nathan, Headmaster, Boston Arts Academy; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

There is a broad array of documentation to support the idea that the arts, in their various forms, are powerful tools with which to engage young people. In this session, four speakers who use arts education in compelling – yet different – ways discussed the extent to which the arts could foster students' engagement in diverse disciplines. By making reference to

various arts-based programs and research projects that are inspiring and supporting students in and beyond school, Kathleen Gallagher (*Centre for Urban Schooling, OISE*), Wendy Luttrell (*Graduate School of Education, Harvard University*), Linda Nathan (*Boston Arts Academy*), and Naomi Savage (*Central Technical School, Toronto District School Board*) explored how educators might broaden their understanding of assessment, in order to acknowledge students' different experiences and ways of knowing; whether or not statistics hindered or supported our ability to meaningfully engage with youth; and how the purposes of arts education can be understood beyond supplementing academic content and improving students' test scores.

Youth Panel A – What Helped or Could Have Helped? Youth Speak Up

"I wish I were more informed about the whole student loan process as a high school student. I wish I knew, you know, times and dates and deadlines and the risks, at the end of the day, of taking the student loan and going to school with it and you know, not having, you know, paid them back because of certain circumstances in my life. And what could happen, right? My story is a result of what happens when you make that sort of mistake. For me, like, I made a mistake, that was my mistake, but I think it's unfair to for one mistake to 'cause somebody, like, so much [negativity]. So for me – if we can inform our students, you know, in those guidance counselor offices, of the entirety of the student loan process, especially, like, black students or students that come from low-income housing, then I think we'll be doing our students, like, a great big justice."
(Mario "The Voyce" Murray, Operations Coordinator, Beatz to da Streetz; Redefining Student Engagement, November 8th, 2007)

Walking away from school is an active and conscious decision, made at the individual level, for complex reasons. Often, it indicates long-standing feelings of disaffection with school as a social institution. This session provided a forum for young people from different walks of life to share their views on student engagement. The life experiences of Cara Eastcott (*Independent filmmaker*), Tonika Morgan (*Medina Collective; Jane and Finch Community Centre*); Mario Murray (*Beatz toda Streetz*), and Many Swinamer (*Nelson Mandela Park Jr. P.S., Toronto District School Board*) engaged the audience in a discussion about how students' particular lived experiences shaped their processes of engagement with, or disaffection from, the school system; the role of collaboration among community agencies, teachers, mentors, parents, etc. to inspire, engage and identify re-entry points to disengaged students; the relationship between teachers' engagement with teaching, and students' sense of engagement in school; and, again, whether or not student engagement should be defined as a process or as a product.

November 9th, 2007 - *Keynote Speaker: Dr. Urvashi Sahni*

"…There is a universe of uncare outside [the school]. And many schools fail to engage their students, so they buy into the universe of uncare and feel that that's the only universe that they can replicate."
(Urvashi Sahni; Redefining Student Engagement, November 9th, 2007)

Dr. Sahni completed her Ph.D. in 1994 in Language and Literacy at the University of California at Berkeley. As an educator, she has founded a high school, and worked extensively in teacher training, curriculum development and school reform in India. She is currently the founder and Director of *The Study Hall Educational Foundation*, in Lucknow, India. Dr. Sahni has also done considerable work in Drama in Education, and the use of technology in Education.

Dr. Sahni's presentation brought an international perspective on student engagement, focusing on the secondary education of young, poor, girls in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. She highlighted both the macro and micro factors that come to bear on these girls' educational experiences, and the opportunities they might have upon graduation. For example, many of the students are domestic workers, even from the age of five. Although they have paid domestic work at several homes, and unpaid domestic work in their own homes, and although many of them experience physical abuse at home, they still come to school every day with their homework completed, and ready to learn. The key questions Dr. Sahni addressed were, "Why do these students work so hard, knowing how limited their opportunities are?", "What does 'school' and 'education' mean to them?", and "How does the school engage them?"

Session 5 – Plugging Into Youth Pop Culture: Music, Style and Identities

"Uncritical dismissals of popular culture as gibberish close off the possibility of entering into the realities of students by educators."
(Mark Campbell, Doctoral candidate, OISE; Redefining Student Engagement, November 9th, 2007)

Participants in this session explored various expressions of youth popular culture, and the forms of culturally relevant pedagogy that are intrinsically linked to this issue. They also discussed best practices that illustrate how teachers are attempting to plug into these cultural forms to engage students in learning, and in thinking critically about the society in which they live. The three panelists – Mark Campbell (*Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, OISE*), Adonis Huggins (*Regent Park Focus Media Arts Centre*), and Shauna Pomerantz (*Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University*) – took seriously the nature of the relationship between cultural production in schools and community; how schools' policies, pedagogies and practices respond to students' cultural or aesthetic presentations of

self; and the limits that the relations of power within schools place on the ability of teachers to effectively engage with students' cultural productions.

Session 6 – Culture, Religion and Student Engagement: Framing the Debate

"These schools, these institutions are on indigenous land, and the culture and the language and the knowledge that aboriginal people have came from this land. So there's a responsibility to that knowledge, to that culture, to that language and to the people to be respectfully including it, and addressing it, and what is done in schools that are located here. But that has certainly been invalidated for very long, too long. And there's much for everyone to learn from this knowledge, so if you're here, I think you have the responsibility to it."
(Jean-Paul Restoule, Professor, OISE; *Redefining Student Engagement*, November 9th, 2007)

This session examined the daily challenges by ethnocultural and religious diversity to teachers and school administrators, who sometimes perceive students from particular ethnocultural and/or religious groups as being "unequipped" to engage successfully in school. Annie Kidder (*People for Education*), Felix Salazar (*Toronto Catholic District School Board*), Jean-Paul Restoule (*Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology, OISE*) and Jean-Paul Willaime (*Sorbonne University/REDCO, France*) explored these issues by drawing from their particular experiences as educators, researchers, and community activists. The ensuing discussion considered how schools might engage students in explaining both the cultural/social and personal/spiritual dimensions of religion; what can be learned from other educational structures/systems about effective student engagement; and the politics (both micro and macro) that affect students' capacity to be engaged in their schooling.

Youth Panel B – The Schools We Want: High School Students Discuss What Needs to Change

"Don't just take it easy on me because I've had a rough life. Challenge me. Make me want to continue. I'm a person who enjoys challenges, who enjoys debates, who enjoys being right and you know, give me a reason to show -- Give me something -- Give me a reason to show you what I can do and how I'm worthy…"
(Mishayla Vandenheuvel, Student, TDSB; Redefining Student Engagement, November 9th, 2007)

Genesis Ampuero-Lucas (*Westview Centennial S.S., Toronto District School Board*), Genele Joseph (*Westview Centennial S.S., Toronto District School Board*), Jamal Paisley (*Central Commerce Collegiate, Toronto District School Board*), and Mishayla Vandenheuvel (*City Adult Learning Centre, Toronto District School Board*) analyzed their educational experiences, and provided the audience with recommendations for supporting student engagement. The

analysis and subsequent discussion focused on how students' visions of engaging classrooms and related school environments could be included in school curriculum and planning; how the arts, sports, tutoring and extra-curricular activities helped students to understand who they are, how they learn, and where they want to go in life; how teacher-student relationships could be redefined to increase positive student engagement; they types of institutional and systemic barriers prevent at-risk youth from being engaged in school; and the role of students' perceived physical and psycho-social safety in keeping them engaged in their learning.

APPENDIX B: Symposium Eye "Coding Matrix"

Legend
SE = **S**tudent **E**ngagement

KQ = **K**ey **Q**uestions (across all presentations)
KQ1: What counts as SE?
KQ2: What's at stake if SE doesn't matter?
KQ3: Why does SE need to be redefined?

WGF = **W**orking **G**roups **F**oci
WGF1: Economy, labour force participation, career aspirations/trajectory
WGF2: Academic outcomes (e.g. attendance, curricular and extracurricular participation, achievement, etc.)
WGF3: Social cohesion, civic engagement (e.g. integration of new Canadians, equity of access to support, shared values and goals)
WGF4: School climate, culture (e.g. relationships with/to students, families; sense of belonging), curriculum and pedagogy

SESSION TITLE:							
SYMPOSIUM EYE:							
GA:							
Panelists	**KQ1** (What counts?)	**KQ2** (What's at stake?)	**KQ3** (Why redefined?)	**WGF1** (Economy)	**WGF2** (Academic outcomes)	**WGF3** (Cohesion & engagement)	**WGF4** (School climate, etc.)

APPENDIX C: "Working Notes" for a Multidimensional Framework of Student Engagement

January 15, 2008

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (SEF)

1. PURPOSE

1. Student Engagement (SE) a crucial issue in the Province
2. Critique common concept of Student Engagement
3. Student Engagement Framework used to inform discussions of Student Engagement; school board level, provincial level, school level
4. Understand the complexity of Student Engagement
5. Do the answers to Symposium eye questions provide the framework?
6. Where will the framework go?
7. Policy discussions….importance of having a breathing document
   - CUS claiming some expertise on Student Engagement
   - Research projects
   - Student engagement framework, something newsworthy for CUS

- Student Engagement Framework (SEF) a tool to understand something
  - What kinds of policies
  - Wealth accumulation
  - Parent involvement
  - School safety
- Frameworks advocate for a particular perspective
  OR it can help us analyze
- Student Engagement Framework should advocate for a particular perspective on student engagement
- Framework as a set of questions
- Questions are invitational

2. STRUCTURE OF REPORT

1) Intro-statement of the Problem
- •Existing data show student engagement as a problem
- •Conceptual issues
- •What's at stake?

2) **Description of the Symposium**
- Preview
- Rationale/criteria

3) **Framework-Questions**

4**) Implications**

3. GUIDING QUESTIONS

1)What is Student Engagement?
- How can we effectively measure it?
- Impact on educational outcome and community health/development?

2)What counts as Student Engagement?
- What's at stake?
- Why does it need to be redefined?

3)What role do
- parents
- teachers
- peers
- government
- community organizations

4. GENERATING QUESTIONS

1)Identify key issues/concerns for each session.
2)Develop questions based on issues/concerns

FROM SESSION 1:

•How do self-esteem and student engagement interact?
•How do programs hold students to high expectations while also providing flexible routes?
•Is student engagement present or future-focused?

FROM SESSION 3:

•What gets in the way of reforming schools to be more engaging? (sources of resistances to reform and barriers)
•Are all students equally at risk of disengagement?
•How is student engagement observable and not observable?
•Something about relevant pedagogies.
•Narratives/testimonials as starting places (related to evaluations and definitions of student engagement)

FROM SESSION 5:

•With in school vs. connections with outside. Definitions of "culture"
•What should relationship between cultural production in schools and community look like?
•"How do schools" policies, pedagogies and practices investigate or respond to students' presentations of self?
•What limits does the structure of schools and the power relationship within that structure place on the ability of teachers to effectively engage with students' cultural production?

PREPARATION FOR FRIDAY:

1) Dominique and Lance code sessions 2,4,6

2)Everyone else try to identify major themes. Try to identify five (5).

3) Friday: 9:30 – 2

January 18, 2008

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (SEF)

1. DOMINIQUE'S WORK

SESSION #2

- Is student engagement a "process" or a "product"?
- How can/should schools involve students in decision-making? Which decisions should they be involved in?
- Does student engagement take different forms? How do you recognize/measure them?

SESSION #4

- How do we broaden our understanding of assessment to acknowledge students' different experiences and ways of knowing?
- Do statistics hinder or support our ability to meaningfully engage with youth?
- Beyond improving/supporting academic content, how do the arts……?

SESSION #6

- How can we engage students in explaining both the cultural/social and personal/spiritual dimensions of religion?
- What can be learned from other educational structures/systems about effective student engagement?
- What are the politics (micro and macro) that affect student's engagement? *(Can refer to Ben, Jane, & Katina's article on what shapes inner-city education policy – CUSSG, Jan. 23, 2008)*

2. NEXT STEPS

1)Create conceptual map (Luisa)
- -dimensions of SE
- -authors/stakeholders contribute to SE
- -student trajectories

2)Generate Categories/Domains

3)Principles within each domain

How systematic do we need to be?

Efficiency!

Multiple Audiences!

Order of work

4) Determine the principles for each domain:

Lance – assessment and school culture and environment
Luisa – community and neighbourhood dynamics
Students' lived experiences
Jeff – curriculum and pedagogy and classroom culture
Dominique – parents and family

5) YOUTH SESSION #1

- How do student's particular lived experiences shape their process of engagement or disaffect with the school system?
- What is the role of collaboration among community agencies, teachers, mentors, parents, etc. to inspire, engage and show re-entry points to disengaged students.

• What is the relationship between teachers' engagement with teaching and students' sense of engagement in school?
• Should SE be defined as a process or product?

6) YOUTH SESSION #2

- How should students' visions of engaging classrooms and engaging environments be included in school curriculum and planning?
- How do arts, sports, tutoring and extra-curriculars help students to understand who they are, how they learn, and where they want to go?
- How could teacher-student relationships be redefined to increase SE?
- What types of institutional and systemic barriers are preventing at-risk youth from being engaged in school?
- What is the role of students' perceived physical and psychosocial safety in keeping them engaged?

7) SE DOMAINS

*** Parent/family connections**

- political (macro & micro)
- community
- professional

* school culture and environment; structural/institutional

*curriculum and pedagogy/classroom culture

*community/neighbourhood dynamics

- Student support programs

* students lived experiences (youth panel emphasis)

- Peers
- Youth voice
- Cultured religion
- Expectations
- CRT
- Arts-based approaches
- Teachers' engagement with the kids and subject area and schools. (knowledge of subjects)

- * Assessment

- Conceptualization of SE (Introduction)
- Holistic/Relational

APPENDIX D: Blank Model of Student Engagement