

# Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy



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# Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy

BY JOAN DABROWSKI AND TANJI REED MARSHALL

Heading to World History before the late bell, an adolescent drags his sneakers down the linoleum hallway. “I’m so tired when I’m walking to last period because it’s the end of the day and I’m ready to go,” he says. “But once I get there, I’m awake because it’s really engaging,” he continues. “It’s not just book work. We have arguments about the subjects we talk about and there’s always someone who has a counterargument. And the teacher, he’s never just like, ‘Alright, you’ve proved your point’. It’s ‘evaluate this’ or ‘explain this more’. And I really enjoy that.”

This student’s teacher is creating the kinds of engaged learning opportunities that research shows deepen content mastery and lead to improved academic outcomes. A positively engaged student is more likely to be a successful student.<sup>1</sup> Too few students, however, have this experience in American classrooms today. Our recent analysis of over 6,800 middle school assignments yielded disappointing results in the area of motivation and engagement.<sup>2</sup> For that analysis, we looked closely at choice and relevancy — two powerful levers for engaging adolescents. Students should be given choice in their learning and tasks should be relevant, using real-world experiences and examples for students to make connections with their goals, interests, and values. Few assignments, however, met such criteria.

For students to thrive and achieve at high levels, they must be interested and emotionally invested in their learning. Why? Because motivation, or the desire that propels one to do something, leads to engagement, where students are being attentive to their tasks, putting forth positive effort, persisting through challenges, and advancing their ideas and understandings with a sense of intention. And with current college- and career-ready standards demanding more rigor, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving, students — now perhaps more than ever — need to stay positively engaged with and socially and emotionally connected to their learning.<sup>3</sup>

Reading, writing, and talking about multifaceted topics and tasks is not to be taken lightly. Generating claims, solving complex problems, developing and navigating arguments based on credible and relevant evidence — all of this is challenging work. It requires students to grapple with rich content, plan, organize, set goals, and be socially aware. Engagement is essential.

As noted in previous [publications](#) by The Education Trust, assignments are a powerful lens for viewing the day-to-day experiences of students. Assignments represent what teachers

know and understand about the standards and show how students interact with the curriculum. It is this interaction — the engagement (or disengagement) — with the curriculum that we considered when setting the criteria for motivation and engagement on our *Literacy* and *Math Assignment Frameworks*. While classroom environment and teacher-student relationships influence motivation and engagement, these areas cannot be fully captured in a stand-alone assignment.<sup>4</sup> Educators can, however, look at both the content and the design features of an assignment. These two areas serve as close proxies for student engagement because they hold the potential to ignite and propel interest and enthusiasm.

In this brief, we take a closer look at the criteria for motivation and engagement in rigorous assignments, specifically the role of choice and relevancy. What does it mean for educators to offer their students authentic choices? How can educators bring relevancy to their assignments, and what do they need to be cautious about? And finally, what steps do educators and school, district, and state leaders need to take to ensure that more students benefit from engaging learning opportunities and the successful outcomes that follow?

## DEFINING CHOICE

Anchored in the field of psychology, providing choice within an assignment promotes the healthy development of student autonomy. Affording students opportunities in which they are “in charge of their lives” is central to their academic achievement and emotional adjustment.<sup>5</sup> When students make decisions about their work, they are empowered to own it. Moreover, their ownership of a task leads to self-direction and self-discipline because they are personally invested in the outcomes. Offering students choice supports a universally held goal in teaching and learning: Teachers want their students to become more capable independent learners. An opposite approach plays out when teachers control all aspects of the assignment or guide students in lockstep fashion through each step. In these scenarios, students are made to relinquish all power and decision making, and teachers revert to using power to control bodies and minds instead of using their autonomy to invite learning.<sup>6</sup>

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## CHOICE IN ASSIGNMENTS

In our framework, we assess choice within an assignment across three areas: content, product, and process. In each area, students must be held to grade-level standards and pushed to think deeply and critically. We do not suggest assignments be filled with so many choices to the point of disarray or unclear boundaries. Rather, assignments should, on a regular basis, offer a least one meaningful choice for students.

(See Table 1 for more details.)

### Content

Educators provide choice in content when they present broad topics to all but allow individual students to narrow their tasks to a subtopic or to a particular slice of the content. For example, in a history course in which students are engaged in a study of World War II, one student might opt to delve into the Normandy invasion, while another seeks to understand how the U.S. could fight for freedom abroad while championing segregation at home. In an ELA class, students can explore the concept of identity through a range of texts chosen from a teacher's strategically created classroom library. Texts by a wide range of authors, including authors of color, such as Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, or Cece Bell's *El Deafo*, for example, have unique content, but the overarching theme of identity can be applied to all.

### Product

Choice in product allows students to determine how they will present what they have learned. In a science course, one student might opt to write a two-page article summarizing and analyzing key findings from a lab investigation, while another student creates a PowerPoint presentation with the same goal.

In English, after reading and discussing *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, a student might write a literary analysis based on an essential question linked with the text, such as, "How does where you live impact who you are?" while another student writes a literary critique of the text. In each of these scenarios, students grapple with complex texts and topics, apply the principles of argumentation, and include textual evidence, but they are self-directing how they do so.

### Process

Finally, choice in process acknowledges and embraces the reality that all people, including children and adolescents, learn in different ways. Some people need social interaction to process and refine ideas, while others need internal reflection to find meaning. Some may take a linear approach to a task, while others may work in more recursive ways. Honoring these preferences means offering assignments in which students are given the freedom to design their course of action, sequence their steps as they go along, work alone or with peers, or manage timelines and deliverables.

Teacher boundaries and supports related to choice will vary based on a student's age and competency. For example, some students may be ready for "mini-choices," such as selecting the text they will read from a choice of three options or choosing a favorite passage from a class novel and then writing about it. Others will be comfortable with wider choices, such as generating their own questions for analysis or independently selecting a text based on their own interests and experience. In each of these cases, students engage more fully because they have been given some level of autonomy.

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*"My English teacher, for his midterm, we had the option to take a scene from the book that we'd been reading and reverse it or alter it in a different way. And put a twist on it. I thought that was really fun. Because it was like, we're independent but we're still using what we've learned. And basically, it just evaluated how much we understood it so we could really give it a twist."*

**TABLE 1: Choice in Assignments**

CHOICE	WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Broad topics are provided by the teacher; students can narrow/or specify the topic.</li> <li>● Content choices include self-selected texts or topics.</li> </ul>
<b>Product</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students are given a choice on how they will present their learning: genre, structure, medium.</li> </ul>
<b>Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students are given the freedom to design their course of action and sequence their steps as they work on an assignment.</li> <li>● Students may work alone or with their peers.</li> <li>● Students manage their timelines and deliverables — with teacher support provided as needed.</li> </ul>

## DEFINING RELEVANCY

Motivation and engagement interact with an individual’s lived experience (e.g., beliefs, values, interests).<sup>7</sup> In our framework, the personal realm is actualized through relevance: the value students perceive in a given assignment. This perception can either spark interest or lead to disengagement. Researchers have shown that noted interest in a task or topic spurs powerful emotions, stimulating areas of the brain that can positively influence cognition.<sup>8</sup> Thus, paying attention to the relevancy of an assignment is a vital step toward ensuring students are authentically motivated and engaged in learning. But what makes a task relevant? For our assignment analysis work, we focused on three questions:

1. Is the content useful to us?
2. Does it interest us?
3. Is it presented by someone we know and trust?

First, something that feels useful or “worth knowing” also feels valuable. For example, when people purchase a new cell phone, they are very interested in figuring out how to set it up. Many people spend time — with a sense of urgency — syncing their information, downloading new apps, and creating new passwords. The task is relevant because people need cell phones to support their everyday lives.

Second, a task feels valuable when a person has interest in its content. Fans of classical music may be eager to dive

into an orchestral director’s analysis of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony because it deepens and widens their knowledge of music — and it builds on what they may already know and care about when it comes to Beethoven. And it is likely they will have much to say on the topic because they have spent time listening to his pieces. The task may also spark joy and excitement for them — and these emotions open neurological pathways in the brain to support the retention of this newly acquired knowledge.

Finally, a topic that may initially hold little to no interest for people can garner their interest if it is presented or reframed by someone they know and trust and who can guide us toward new ideas or ways of thinking. Consider the following: At a social gathering, a woman who is keenly interested in world events shares with a close friend a horrific news story about a young girl from Pakistan who has been shot simply because she wants to go to school. The woman’s friend is drawn in as he listens to the story. The conversation moves beyond the shooting as she challenges him to think about the “big ideas” — human rights for women and girls, justice, power, and world policies. Her fervor propels him to learn more about this young girl — running internet searches, watching videos of her story, and ultimately buying her book (*I Am Malala*). A new interest is piqued and new learning has occurred.



*“For AP English, they have topics that deal with real issues — the prompts are like that. And to keep us well-informed, our teacher does Edward Murrow Mondays. Everyone brings in an article they thought was pretty cool. And we talk about it.”*

## RELEVANCY IN ASSIGNMENTS

These same ideas apply to students and assignments. When students believe an assignment is useful for their lives — present or future — they will engage. When they have interest in the content, they will engage. Additionally, when students encounter new or unfamiliar content presented by a trustworthy, caring teacher (or peer) who exudes genuine passion for the topic — and for teaching the topic — they will engage.

Teachers bring relevancy to assignments when they do the following:

1. Teach rigorous content using themes across disciplines, cultures, and generations; consider essential questions, and explore universal understandings.<sup>9</sup>
2. Use real-world materials and events to explore poignant topics.
3. Connect with their students' values, interests, and goals.<sup>10</sup>

(See Table 2 for an overview of these areas.)

### Teach Rigorous Content Through Themes, Essential Questions, and Universal Understandings

Teaching through universal themes and understandings promotes student learning. As students explore concepts through meaningful questions that tap into human nature, their desire to understand why something matters or what purpose it holds is piqued. This increases engagement.

Many educators use this approach when they include guiding or essential questions in their curricular units. These questions prompt students to learn about the “big ideas” or essential understandings within a discipline.<sup>11</sup> For example, a math teacher can organize a measurement unit by asking, “*Why is measurement important for our world today? What type of problems can be solved with measurement?*” A science teacher can anchor a unit on the environment by including a question such as, “*How does where we live affect how we live?*” In ELA, a teacher might frame a writing unit by asking students, “*Why should we consider who reads our writing? How does knowing our audience influence the way we write?*”

Universal themes and long-standing dualities (e.g., power, justice, empathy, good vs. evil, individual vs. collective) can also be crafted into compelling queries, such as, “*What makes a government fair and just?*” or “*Is it ever OK to lie?*” These types of well-structured questions guide students toward the central ideas a teacher wants them to know and understand.

Student engagement is more likely to occur in assignments attached to essential questions because (1) the questions are interesting to consider; (2) the questions call for critical thinking and diverse opinions; (3) there’s more than one “right answer”; and (4) students can do the work in unique and creative ways as they analyze the content of the question, research the facts and details, discover new information, and seek out answers and solutions. In sum, assignments grounded in inquiry, “big ideas,” or themes allow students to develop “the mental acuity and fluency necessary to succeed in school and work, as well as to achieve a sense of purpose in their personal lives.”<sup>12</sup>

### Use Real-World Materials and Events

The world is a dynamic place where compelling events happen every day, and technology permits young people to interact with these events as quickly as they unfold. When assignments are linked to the present-day world, students will likely recognize or be somewhat familiar with the content immediately. The content will feel genuine and authentic because it represents *their* world. If it holds meaning for them, they will be interested.

It is not enough, however, to focus only on the here and now. Instead, assignments that incorporate current events should be linked to the “big ideas” or universal themes of a discipline. These assignments bridge the known to the unknown for students. The real-world materials and events serve as powerful “hooks,” as students are skillfully drawn in to new or unfamiliar content by a passionate teacher who knows how to make these timely associations. For example, during a World War II unit, a history teacher might opt to assign news articles about racial discrimination that Muslim Americans face today due to the terrorist attacks that have occurred around the world. It is likely students would know, or perhaps have heard, about this situation. The teacher might then assign students to read about the plight of many Japanese Americans immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Students will recognize both the similarities and differences. By using a current event, the teacher has skillfully primed the students to understand and appreciate new or unfamiliar content.

Additionally, when a real-world example can be analyzed to illuminate essential understandings within a subject matter (e.g., presidential election linked to a study of democracy, severe weather events linked to science and mathematics, discovery of dinosaur fossils linked to the study of evolution), the technical classroom content becomes meaningful, useful, and relevant because it exists in the students’ present-day lives and that connection has been illuminated through intentional tasks and assignments.

## Connect With Student Values, Interests, and Goals

Students of all ages have values and interests. They also have hopes and aspirations for their futures. Teachers must know about these both for their individual students and for the collective classrooms of students.

Knowing an individual’s unique passions allows teachers to customize assignments to pique interest and engagement. For example, if an eighth-grade English teacher focused on a research unit knows Tiffany is fascinated with space travel, then it makes good sense for that teacher to fuel Tiffany’s interest by allowing her to demonstrate her research knowledge as she reads and writes about Mars exploration. This connection ensures Tiffany will find the research work relevant. And it is likely the assignment can be linked to Tiffany’s future hopes and goals — both immediate and long term (e.g., taking an advanced science class in high school, attending college, becoming a scientist).

Knowing the collective interests and passions of students also allows teachers to seize the predictable developmental milestones teachers see from students and turn these into

opportunities for relevant teaching and learning. For instance, it is common for 9- and 10-year-old children to have a heightened awareness of peer relationships. Thus, a relevancy-minded teacher can plan assignments to tap into this by exploring guiding questions, such as, “*What makes a healthy relationship?*” Relationships can be applied across subjects as students study characters in literature, plants and animals in science, geography, history, and mathematical concepts such as equality and balance.

In similar fashion, middle school teachers can harness their students’ keen sense of justice and fairness — a typical “hot spot” for adolescents rapidly developing their moral compasses — as they look for these themes in their distinct disciplines. Teachers who think about relevance when designing assignments know two things: (1) their students as individuals and as a collective group; and (2) the compelling nuances of their discipline that will resonate for students. There is great potential for students to stretch and grow because interesting assignments often propel them to ask additional questions, explore related content, and ultimately learn more.

**TABLE 2: Relevancy in Assignments**

RELEVANCE	WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
<b>Themes, Essential Questions, and Universal Understandings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Complex concepts</li> <li>● Questions and inquiry</li> </ul>
<b>Real-World Materials and Events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Current events (e.g., national, global)</li> <li>● Issues and events within their local/school community</li> <li>● Concrete materials and tools</li> </ul>
<b>Connection With Student Values, Interests, and Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Personal (individual student)</li> <li>● Collective (grade level/developmental age)</li> <li>● Cultural</li> <li>● Moral development</li> <li>● Generational</li> </ul>



# RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Given the important role motivation and engagement play in the field of education, it is not surprising to find a vast number of studies and papers on the topic both in the United States and abroad.<sup>18</sup> Here's a closer look at what the research says on particular aspects of the topic:

## **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards**

Historically, researchers have noted the complexities about how to best motivate and engage learners — using either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards.<sup>19</sup> Intrinsic refers to doing things for one's own interest, preference, or satisfaction, while extrinsic signals receiving a reward or avoiding a punishment. While extrinsic rewards, such as stickers or extra recess, may provide an initial “burst” of engagement, they rarely improve achievement in the long term.<sup>20</sup> Extrinsic rewards appear to be more helpful when they are optional and emphasize processes or inputs a student can control. For example, reading more books will likely improve comprehension; thus, setting a goal for reading a certain number of books is an external motivator that may positively impact reading comprehension. The ultimate goal, however, is for students to be intrinsically motivated to read, write, think, and speak across disciplines — to find joy in “gaining knowledge and skills.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Motivation and Engagement Over Time**

Motivation and engagement evolve as children progress into adolescence. Children are more likely to seek approval and recognition from adults, while adolescents seek more autonomy and peer relationships become more important.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, as students transition into middle and high school, they become more aware of their world, both within and beyond the classroom. Topics that touch on social justice, current events, and personal experiences are likely to engage adolescents seeking to better understand their place in the world.<sup>23</sup>

## **How Race, Culture, and Class Intersect With Motivation and Engagement**

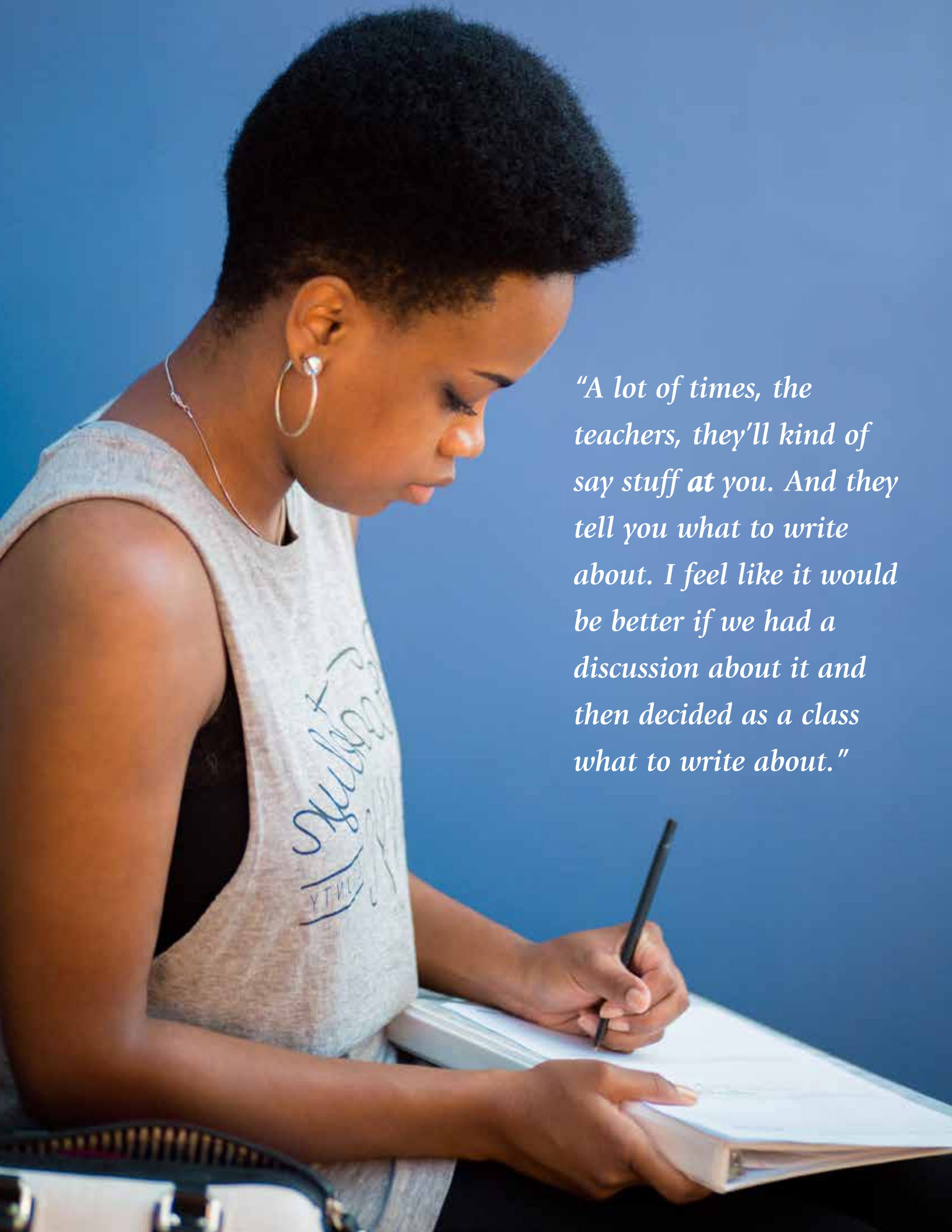
Motivation and engagement intersect with race, culture, and class.<sup>24</sup> Researchers have noted specific patterns of disengagement in reading and in mathematics for particular groups of students.<sup>25</sup> These studies note that educators reduce these negative patterns when they establish responsive classrooms in which all students are (1) held to high expectations, (2) offered choices, (3) supported in their unique learning needs, and (4) culturally and linguistically respected.<sup>26</sup>

## **Mindset and "Grit"**

Motivation and engagement have been linked with mindset — the ideas and attitudes one has about oneself — and, more recently, with student persistence or “grit.”<sup>27</sup> The thinking here is a student's mindset and his or her determination to persevere leads to motivation and engagement. While this seems logical at first glance, critics have argued that grit is a narrow and incomplete understanding of how or why a student succeeds. And the implementation of “grit-driven” approaches in schools may perpetuate ineffective, reductive teaching and discipline structures that limit creative thinking and complex problem solving.<sup>28</sup> Grit-focused schools and teachers may also expect low-income students and students of color to simply “push through challenges” and “work hard” to overcome obstacles well beyond their control (e.g., poverty, food scarcity, racism) — obstacles their affluent White peers rarely experience.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, grit-focused schools and teachers might assume a singular idea about what grit should look like and penalize students for not demonstrating a prescribed set of “grit practices.” However, as teachers use supportive structures, such as providing “wise feedback” on assignments, students can see themselves through a growth mindset lens and develop the kind of academic grit that can lead to positive outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

## **Motivation and Engagement in the Classroom**

The classroom environment impacts student engagement.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, teacher-student relationships and peer relationships have been widely noted in the literature. The overriding theme is that students are more likely to be positively engaged in their learning when they feel a sense of trust and belonging -- when they believe their teacher and peers genuinely care about them as learners.<sup>32</sup>



*"A lot of times, the teachers, they'll kind of say stuff at you. And they tell you what to write about. I feel like it would be better if we had a discussion about it and then decided as a class what to write about."*

## Three Caveats About Relevancy

In their efforts to influence relevancy around assignments, teachers must (1) be cautious about gimmicks and artificial techniques with unproven results, (2) be thoughtful about the content of the assignment, and (3) recognize the important role of knowledge acquisition.

First, dangling rewards (e.g., stickers, candy, token economy prizes) or tapping into pop culture (e.g., music, celebrities, professional athletes) as a means of generating interest in a task may yield participation and enthusiasm in the moment. However, researchers have shown these types of strategies rarely influence deeper learning.<sup>13</sup> Offering a longer recess to students may motivate them to finish their chapter questions based on the class novel, but this engagement technique will not necessarily lead them to become proficient readers in the long term. Likewise, playing a familiar rap song may spark students' interest temporarily; however, the mere use of a song does not guarantee students will develop the deep analytical skills needed when encountering complex texts at a later time. Moreover, there can be added harm when song lyrics perpetuate stereotypes or serve as trite proxies of a culture. This is not to suggest an absolute when deciding whether to include a new motivation technique, but rather that careful consideration and an instructional rationale are needed.

Second, in every assignment, teachers must be able to help students recognize and understand the value it holds for them. Memorizing vocabulary words in isolation or completing multiple problems in mathematics for the sake of mastering an algorithm are two illustrative examples. The content itself is worthwhile. However, the *design* of the task fails to emphasize the content's real-world relevancy. Additionally, attaching gimmicks for motivation (e.g., review games, competitions related to speed and accuracy, prizes for students who get the most answers correct) does not fix the fundamental design flaw. While such elements may sometimes make sense for quick warm-up or review activities, a substantive assignment that seeks to solidify important foundational skills can and should be refined to include moments of real-world application (see Table 2).

Third, an emphasis on relevance cannot lead to less knowledge building. The research evidence on knowledge building is solid: Knowledge makes subsequent learning easier, it grows exponentially, and it enhances problem solving

and reasoning.<sup>14</sup> Effective teachers in all disciplines must anchor their assignments in rigorous content knowledge and vocabulary — finding relevant entry points for students and bridging the known with the unknown. As noted, universal themes and big ideas are useful connectors. For example, as students acquire knowledge and vocabulary about ancient civilizations, they can simultaneously grapple with questions like, *"What does it mean to be civilized? Is our city/town more 'civilized' than ancient ones? How does studying an ancient civilization inform the decisions we make in our community/nation?"*

There will be times when the "real-world" value is related to the "temporary-world" of school. For students, school is a significant slice of their world for now, and there will be moments when students engage because the assignment is important for a grade, a test score, or a final paper, or because it will lead to a positive school outcome (e.g., advancing to an honors or Advanced Placement class, winning an award or prize, presenting to a school wide assembly or the larger community). Emphasizing these outcomes to make the case for relevancy may work for some students but not all. We encourage a measured stance on this as engagement and relevance must push beyond the walls of schooling to include wider world value and application.

## MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN ASSIGNMENTS: WHERE TO GO NEXT?

As mentioned earlier, our analysis of over 6,800 middle school assignments yielded disappointing results in the area of motivation and engagement.<sup>15</sup> Only 10 percent of assignments in English language arts, science, and social studies offered students authentic choices in content, process, or product. Choice in math assignments was even lower, with only 3 percent giving students this opportunity.

Relevancy was also rare. Only 12 percent of ELA, science, and social studies assignments and 2 percent of math assignments met our criteria. If educators are committed to the idea that student motivation and engagement will lead to improved academic achievement, work clearly remains to be done. We offer three next steps for reflection and improvement:

1. Know and value students.
2. Review and refine curriculum.
3. Support teachers in their capacity to do this work well.

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*"In some classes, it feels like teachers just give you worksheets and you're like, 'You're not a sub. Why are we getting all these worksheets?' I like when teachers know what they're doing and have a plan and you can tell how it's going to help you in the future, rather than just coming in and giving something so they can have it in their grade book."*

## Know and Value Students

When educators are asked to do something new or different with their daily assignments, it is appropriate for them to ask a series of fundamental questions: "*Why are we doing this? What is driving this change? Is this best for our students? How will this help them?*"

Keeping students in the forefront when thinking about motivation and engagement in assignments ensures decisions are driven by what adolescents need. This approach echoes the work of culturally responsive teaching.<sup>16</sup> All educators must value that, in order to thrive, their students need opportunities for choice and relevancy in their learning. Teachers fall short when limiting such experiences. When teachers know and value their students' holistic development, they cannot deny a curricular approach that emphasizes motivation and engagement.

## Review and Refine Curriculum: Units, Lessons, and Assignments

Educators must look closely at units, lessons, and assignments in every class or course. Using a tool such as the [\*Assignment Analysis Guide\*](#), teachers (or teacher teams) can review and analyze where choice and relevancy occur within current curriculum. Guiding questions inform this review as educators consider where opportunities exist for students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions, or where content can be augmented to include real-world materials or current events. More broadly, educators should consider new curricular approaches that embed relevancy and choice (e.g., project-based learning, performance tasks, simulations, inquiry-based learning). Guidance and resources are available for districts, schools, and teachers committed to this review and refinement.<sup>17</sup>

## FINAL THOUGHT

Learning is contextual. Therefore, students' lived experiences must be seamless components of their learning process and environment. Authenticity and relevance, which simultaneously challenge students to reach rigorous standards, will motivate and engage students in their learning. This is possible, and teachers should expect no less. When teachers consistently offer assignments that include choice in content, product, or process, students will find the learning ownership needed to stay engaged and achieve at high levels. Educators have the responsibility to meet them, teach them, engage them, and motivate them where they are, and ultimately to bring them forward in meaningful and productive ways.

## Support Teacher Capacity

Teachers can and should work in teams to ensure assignments are frequently embedded with authentic choice and relevance. This alone, however, is not enough. Classroom teachers and administrators need professional learning to better understand what it means to authentically motivate students through assignments. Without this knowledge, educators may mistakenly substitute "fun" for engagement or rely on hollow examples of relevance. (Imagine a teacher who relies on lyrics in pop songs to teach poetic devices, but never leads the students further to analyze and discuss the poetry of Gary Soto, Langston Hughes, or Robert Frost.)

Educators will need time with their colleagues and with curriculum developers to think deeply and critically about their content as it relates to choice and relevancy. They must identify the poignant big ideas and themes — those that speak across cultures and generations — within their disciplines. And these areas must be taught in ways that engage and motivate students to learn new or unfamiliar content. Teachers must also have time with colleagues and pedagogical experts to think deeply and critically about their students — who they are, what they value, and what they need and want to experience as 21st century learners.



## ENDNOTES

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The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization that promotes closing opportunity gaps by expanding excellence and equity in education for students of color and those from low-income families from pre kindergarten through college. Through research and advocacy, the organization builds and engages diverse communities that care about education equity, increases political and public will to act on equity issues, and increases college access and completion for historically underserved students.



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