

**Caring for Engagement:**  
**Case Study Response Plan**

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## **Case Study**

*Nova is a student in your Grade 4 class who continuously struggles to demonstrate learning and engagement with the material you are covering in class. They do not participate in class and barely write anything for their assignments but are never disruptive and keep to themselves. When you try to speak to them about the challenges they're experiencing, they are despondent and non-responsive.*

## **Introduction**

In this case study, Nova represents one of the 20% of students in a classroom that are quietly disengaged (Stade, 2017). These students know how to appease their teachers by not being disruptive, but they are not learning (Gupta & Reeves, 2021). Unfortunately, these disengaged students are often ignored because their teacher values an orderly classroom more than they value real learning (Gupta & Reeves, 2021). When the teacher does acknowledge the student's behaviour, or lack thereof, they often use their position of power to control the student (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Teachers frequently silence personal motivations by dictating what and how the student will learn (Reeve & Shin, 2020). How teachers react in moments of student defiance can be either controlling or caring (Chamberlain et al., 2020), and I intend to take a caring approach to my practice. Adopting the philosophy of Nel Noddings, I will approach student-teacher relationships with care (Noddings, 2005). To prevent behavioural issues, I will focus on building positive relationships and promoting student agency. If issues of behaviour do arise, I will handle them with compassion and patience, try to determine the cause of the problem, and work with relevant stakeholders to find the best solution.

## **Prevention Plan**

To prevent behavioural concerns in my classroom, including disengagement, I will implement strategic teaching methods, rules, procedures, and routines (Sayeski & Brown, 2014) that help to establish positive relationships and foster student agency (Fox, 2016).

Having a strong emotional connection to peers and adults in the classroom is one of the most important factors contributing to student engagement, participation, and academic performance (Miller Lieber et al., n.d.). When students and teachers have a positive relationship, there are about 30% fewer behavioural problems (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). To create group cohesion with my students, I will take a restorative justice approach and implement community circles (Miller Lieber et al., n.d.; Reimer, 2020). Every morning and afternoon there will be a ten to twenty minute community circle gathering where all students and teacher(s) can meet to work on social-emotional learning. In the circle, activities and questions can be presented to help students share their interests, voice their preferred learning styles, make suggestions to classroom structures, resolve social conflicts, admit to academic struggles, or express any emotional concerns. Regular check-ins with students and parents, and giving and receiving student feedback on lessons, will also help to establish a connection between students and myself. If students like Nova feel more comfortable in the student-teacher relationship, perhaps they will communicate their needs to me *before* problems arise. Chamberlain and colleagues (2020), recognize that most defiant behaviours are a result of power tensions between the student and teacher. Conversely, when teachers are autonomy-supportive and allow their students to share in the decision-making, the students will be engaged and do their work (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Fox, 2016; Reeve & Shin, 2020).

Student agency is when students actively contribute to their own learning by asking questions, providing their opinions, and expressing their interests to others (Fox, 2016; Reeve &

Shin, 2020). They take an active role in where, when, how, what, and why they learn (Fox, 2016). To encourage student agency, it is important for a teacher to recognize their motivational style (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Indifferent and controlling motivational styles will only perpetuate or exacerbate disengaged, non-compliant behaviour (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Autonomy supportive motivational styles, however, will help students display agentic engagement in the classroom, which will in turn cause the teacher to be even more autonomy supportive (Reeve & Shin, 2020). If students were to say, “I find it helpful to learn on computers”, or “I prefer to write stories, instead of writing out definitions”, then I could make the lessons more personalized and interesting. Teachers should act on the interests and opinions of the students, so they know that their opinions have value. Students will continue to share and express themselves if they know that the teacher will be receptive to their desires.

In addition to building positive relationships and supporting student agency, teachers can prevent behavioural issues by having clear and consistent expectations (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Making learning objectives, classroom rules, policies, procedures, and behavioural expectations explicit by writing them down for students to see is a successful method of preventing unwanted behaviour (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Before, during, or after lessons, I will calmly and clearly remind students of my expectations. This way, students know what the rules and expectations are, and they know what will happen if the rules are broken, or expectations are not met.

### **Immediate Response**

If Nova was sitting at their desk, not doing their work, and being non-responsive when I tried to ask them about any challenges they were facing, I would first demonstrate acceptance and compassion (Reeve & Shin, 2020). I would attempt to consider Nova’s perspective and understand any negative feelings they had towards completing the work (Reeve & Shin, 2020). I

would try to have an honest conversation with them to determine the reason for disengagement (Stade, 2017). Is the work too difficult? Do they want help? Would they like to work with a partner? Do they need me to provide clarification, or explain something in a different way? Are they just not interested, or is the work boring? Is there something else going on socially or emotionally? What would they prefer to do with their time instead? I would ask Nova how they would like to express themselves, and if they needed to take a five minute break to draw, read, or sit alone in the hallway (Fox, 2016)? Fox (2016) encourages teachers to give students free time for creative expression such as drawing or writing, to help students communicate. If Nova was still not communicating with me, I would tell them that I will come back in a few minutes to check on them and encourage them to try and work on the assignment. I would restate the expectations that they attempt to work on the assignment, explain the rationale behind the task, and the learning objectives (Reeve & Shin, 2020; Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Then, I would leave Nova alone and walk around to check on other students in the class. In five minutes, I would go check on Nova again. If they were still not communicating with me or doing their work, then I would request to speak with them during the recess break.

### **Intermediate Response**

Speaking to Nova alone during recess may give them a sense of security and allow them the chance to be vulnerable and honest. I would be very encouraging and patient during this conversation (Reeve & Shin, 2020). If Nova was still refusing to communicate, then I would inform them that I would be calling home to speak to their parents (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). Hopefully their parents could provide some insight into Nova's behaviour. I would also inform the principal of the situation in case the principal wanted to contribute to a response plan, or if the situation escalated into disruptive behavioural issues and the principal needed to get

involved. Being in continual communication with parents and the principal is important so that everyone can work together as a team (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). If there is a guidance counsellor or psychologist at the school, it may be helpful to inform them of the situation as well in case there is social or emotional factors that Nova has not expressed to me as the teacher.

In the next lesson for the day, I would ensure students were given opportunities to share previous knowledge and insights, voice their opinions, and ask many questions (Fox, 2016). The lesson would be designed such that the students in the class – not the teacher – were doing most of the talking (Gupta & Reeves, 2021), either as a whole group or in small groups (Fox, 2016). Creating a student-centered and student-driven learning environment is important for promoting participation and engagement (Fox, 2016). As the teacher, I would watch for and actively praise students in the classroom who were expressing their ideas and contributing constructively to their own learning (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Hopefully, an interactive lesson design in combination with positive student role-models would encourage Nova to engage more in their learning.

### **Long-term response**

Before proceeding further, I would need to determine the cause of the disengagement – is it due to academic difficulties, attitudes or beliefs about learning, social-emotional challenges, attention-seeking, or something different (Sayeski & Brown, 2014; Stade, 2017)? After gathering more information from individual meetings with Nova, Nova's parents, the principal, and guidance counsellor, I would determine my next steps (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). With a tentative action plan ready, I would consider having a group meeting with any or all stakeholders to determine how best to support Nova's learning (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). With permission, I would also conduct a Functional Behavioural Assessment to help determine Nova's individual needs (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Depending on the results of the assessment, I might try

proximity, direct attention, and support techniques (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). For example, during a lesson, I could ask Nova to read the words written on the board out loud, to focus their attention. When Nova is working individually, I could help them get started on their work by doing the first question with them. If I noticed they were getting distracted or becoming disengaged, I could stand near them as a reminder to focus.

Furthermore, I could implement a targeted group support strategy, such as a Weekly Behaviour Report Card, in which a small report or statement would be sent home to the parents of each student at the end of the week, informing parents on any good and bad behaviours (Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Parents would be encouraged to reward their children for behavioural improvements. This strategy would align with my goals of creating a learning community and establishing strong communication between my students, parents, and staff.

### **Reflexivity**

As a teacher, I value the development of caring relations with my students. A caring relation, as defined by Nel Noddings, involves at least two people – the one who is being cared for and the one who is doing the caring (Noddings, 2005). It is important to note that the relationship is bi-directional and both people must contribute to it (Noddings, 2005). The person who is doing the caring gives their full attention and energy to the other person, focusing only on the other person's goals, for at least a moment (Noddings, 2005). The one who is being cared for gives to the relationship by recognizing, receiving, and responding to the care (Noddings, 2005). In the case of a student-teacher relationship, the teacher focuses on helping the student learn and the student responds by trying their best to understand. In the case of a disengaged student like Nova, the relationship between the teacher and student is broken because the student is not receiving and responding to the care. Thus, when a student is disengaged from a lesson and not

responding when I try to talk to them about it, I must reflect on how to improve my relationship with that student so that they are once again receptive to my care.

To help prevent and amend the situation with Nova, I would actively engage relevant stakeholders (Nova, Nova's parents, the principal, the guidance counsellor, etc.) in dialogue. Genuine and open dialogue can be used to understand the perspectives of others, express care, and resolve issues (Noddings, 2005; Reimer, 2020). To express care and build relations, I would also learn and implement the interests of my students into lessons (Fox, 2016; Gupta & Reeves, 2021; Noddings, 2005; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reimer, 2020; Sayeski & Brown, 2014). Part of reflexivity is to evaluate my progress and be accountable for implementing my value of caring relationships into my practice (Ryan & Webster, 2019). Thus, I will openly share my goal of a caring practice with my students, and we can all reflect on it during our community circles.



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