Willing Compliance

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Introduction: Compliance and Engagement

Student engagement is a growth area in the educational advice industry. Strategies for promoting engagement are proliferating, each accompanied by its own laudatory terminology: hands-on versus lecture, teacher-centered versus learner-centered, exhortation-based versus consequences-based, extrinsically motivated versus intrinsically motivated, authoritarian versus democratic. But what is engagement, to which the recommended strategies supposedly lead?

The term "engagement" is used by some researchers to refer to mental states such as interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, and optimism.[1] But what engagement means concretely in the daily experience of teachers, parents, and school administrators can more reliably be defined in terms of observable behavior — willing participation in activities adults value, referred to in the classroom management literature as "time on task." Whatever mental states are implied by engagement, the bottom line in behavioral terms is compliance in educational activities — willing compliance. Grudging or reluctant compliance may be acceptable for brief periods, but prolonging it, as Alfie Kohn has noted in his well-known critique of classroom management techniques, can be an arduous process involving increasingly frequent and aggressive adult interventions.[2] Willing compliance is the gold standard in classroom management. "Engagement" is fraught with paternalistic overtones that are rarely acknowledged.

Is willing compliance a contradiction in terms? A student is expected to take part in an activity prescribed by the teacher. The teacher's will, in effect, trumps his or her own. Kohn criticizes this view of discipline, suggesting that the need for compliance is reduced when students are allowed to make decisions.[3] Even in participatory classrooms, however, broad goals are set by the state, the school, and the teacher, and students are expected to comply by choosing activities that further them. The question remains, can such subordination ever be truly voluntary, as "willing compliance" implies?

This essay examines two quite different reasons that could motivate a child's[4] voluntary subordination of her will to the teacher's will. The first is duty. The child could decide that she morally ought to do what the teacher asks of her. The second is enjoyment. The child could decide that she enjoys the activity and therefore her desires coincide with the teacher's.

The second section of this essay describes these two motivational sets and examines how teachers incorporate them in planning instruction. It outlines how teachers appeal to students' moral obligation to learn and how the appeal can go wrong. It offers a definition of enjoyment, explains how it enables teachers to elicit compliance, and suggests some of its limitations as a strategy for classroom management.

The third section probes the connection between willing compliance and the underlying problem of justifying paternalistic control. According to one widely held view, the child's willing compliance would appear to justify a teacher's paternalistic control, but the two kinds of compliance address this issue in different ways, and teachers need to be sensitive to the differences.

The essay concludes by pointing out the importance of appeals to students' moral obligation to learn, even in democratic classrooms where students participate in decision making. Eliciting compliance based on obligation may require more effort by teachers, but it is a minimum condition of honesty in teachers' dealings with children and an indispensable aid to students' development of moral judgment and agency.

Obligation and Enjoyment

Most teachers and parents believe that children have a duty to learn, both to fulfill the responsibilities of democratic citizenship and to avoid foreclosing advantageous options in life. This is equally true for those who view learning prescriptively and for those who prize self-direction. The moral character of these duties is evident in our willingness to exhort children to take advantage of their learning opportunities and in our disapproval when they don't.

The duty to learn is a self-regarding duty — an action obligatory because it avoids harm to or promotes the well-being of the agent herself, rather than others. Some philosophers dispute the existence of self-regarding duties.[5] This objection, however, can be set aside in the present discussion. Whether or not the belief in students' duty to learn is mistaken, it is widely held by those dealing with children, and it is a belief to which teachers often appeal and which frequently motivates student compliance.

In order to invoke educational duties, teachers must first design or help students design activities that enable the students to learn. Students have an obligation to participate in these "learning routines" whether or not they enjoy them. Learning routines can be open-ended or highly scripted, as long as what students learn through participating in them contributes to future well-being. Teachers hold students responsible for participation by explaining the purpose of the activity, what they will learn from it, and why this knowledge is important.[6] Willing compliance is achieved when students understand and accept this explanation.

The learning routine, in short, generates a moral argument which can secure students' willing compliance in activities they don't necessarily enjoy. This result, however, is not guaranteed. Some activities cannot be defended in this manner, and even when students are presented with a sound argument, they may either not understand it or not accept it.

The learning routine argument fails if the activity does not lead to learning. If an activity is beyond the scope of a student's ability, s/he has little hope of success, and the moral argument for making an effort is undercut. If it is too easy, the student can do it successfully but is unlikely to learn from it. Seatwork designed primarily to keep students occupied is often criticized on these grounds.

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Suppose that an activity presented to students does lead to learning. The moral argument can still fail if what students learn does not contribute meaningfully to their future well-being. Test preparation activities, memorizing state capitals, or learning long lists of vocabulary words out of context could be construed as activities of this type. Once again, the learning routine argument turns out to be invalid in such cases. Students do not have a moral obligation to complete the tasks, and attempts to convince them otherwise are dishonest. If students sense this dishonesty, it is bound to have a corrosive effect on their relationship with the teacher and perhaps on their perception of school as an institution. Teachers who sense that their exhortations are not fully credible may retreat into cynicism toward their jobs, their students, or their own professional authority.

Even if sound, a moral argument may either fail to convince students that they have a duty, or convince but fail to motivate compliance. Students may not understand the teacher's explanation of why the activity is important. A student may understand the argument but not be moved by it because of being unaccustomed to thinking in terms of long-term well-being. As Susan Wolf has suggested and research on development confirms, a certain experiential background is needed for a person to be moved by moral considerations.[7]

Even if a student understands the argument and considers her long-term well-being, she may be skeptical. A student may believe that academic achievement is appropriate for other students but not for her. Sometimes, as John Ogbu has argued, this skepticism arises from a history of discrimination, the effects of which can be felt even by children in prosperous families.[8] It can also arise from lack of exposure to educational opportunities and high-status jobs. Typically it is more difficult to explain why academic skills are important to students whose neighbors and family members don't have those skills and have never worked in occupations that require them.

Finally, even if students are convinced *and* motivated, moral arguments can lose their force over time. When tasks prove unenjoyable, the quality of attention is compromised. Compliance is bound to become mechanical, and unrewarding tasks can eventually become unbearable.

Moral arguments, in short, can be effective, but they don't always work. They don't cover everything teachers want them to cover; inappropriate use may generate resentment or cynicism. How readily students accept them will depend on the degree to which they share teachers' values, background knowledge, and communication style. And even when moral arguments work, they don't work perfectly or forever.

Because of these limitations, teachers must look to other sources of motivation for compliance. The best alternative candidate is enjoyment. Enjoyment covers a range of affective states — interest, pleasure, and excitement, for example — that share the motivational property that we look forward to an activity or want to persist when we engage in it.

This motivational property is captured in Richard Warner's philosophical definition of enjoyment. Warner contends that we enjoy an activity just in case

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engaging in it causes us to want to continue to do so or to do so again in the future.[9] Some have argued that this is a very thin account of enjoyment, capturing none of its phenomenological features, in particular, pleasure.[10] Warner's account, however, is well suited to our present needs because of its focus on motivation.

There are several different views about the relationship between enjoyment and learning. One account holds that enjoyment of an activity leads to repetition and prolonged attention, which maximize learning. This argument appears frequently in discussions about learning to read. The more one enjoys reading, the more one is likely to read; the more one reads, the better one gets at it. Hence the pedagogical emphasis on reading for pleasure. The idea is that learning is accelerated when students engage in activities they like and want to continue.

Some researchers posit a more robust relationship between enjoyment and learning. Flow theory suggests that peak experiences characterized by high challenge and high skill support are intrinsically motivating, and students who have these experiences seek to replicate them, thereby developing new skills and preparing themselves to meet progressively greater challenges.[11] However, learning can occur without the presence of flow conditions, and enjoyment generated by high skill support and optimal challenge is not the only form of enjoyment students may experience. Any kind of enjoyment that fits Warner's definition satisfies the conditions of willing compliance.

The fact that an activity is or might be enjoyable does not guarantee compliance. First, students must cooperate when the activity is first initiated. To enjoy an activity, one has to engage in it at least once. Consequently a teacher may have to start off with some other motivational strategy. Second, tastes differ. The child who enjoys the activity will participate willingly. But the child who does not will need to be coaxed, cajoled, or possibly threatened with "consequences," and here the appeal to enjoyment appears hypocritical. Furthermore, even children who enjoy an activity will probably not do so indefinitely. Enjoyment is not a panacea; on the contrary, enjoyable activities require constant vigilance and deft management on the part of the teacher.

Both enjoyment and appeal to duty have a role to play in motivating on-task behavior. Eliciting compliance, however, is a considerable achievement, and maintaining it is a precarious enterprise. Why should a state of affairs so conceptually simple require such tact and vigilance on the part of the teacher? The basic problem, noted previously, is that engagement implies the subordination of a child's will to that of an adult. A child may enjoy learning activities designed by the teacher or by classmates, but they are still initiated and managed by others. However enjoyable the activities, the child must participate; s/he may not get up and just walk away.

This state of affairs requires justification. The next section examines the kind of justification required and the justificatory role of moral obligation and enjoyment.

Legitimacy and Paternalism

The education of children is inherently paternalistic, even when children comply willingly. To paraphrase Gerald Dworkin, paternalistic intervention restricts

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the freedom of others for their own good, when they are not fully capable of recognizing and pursuing their own good without that restriction.[12] For Dworkin, paternalistic restriction is justified only if the restricted persons actually do or hypothetically would endorse the restriction when in full possession of their rational faculties. To this account, I add the further condition that the intervention must be conscientious — that is, the person imposing restrictions must have thought through the likely outcome and reasonably believe that it will benefit the children. This condition is implied in Dworkin's definition, and is made explicit to highlight its role in classroom management issues.

Not all discipline is paternalistic. Children are subjected to rules, routines, and other demands for the sake of others' well-being, not just their own. Not poking, not pushing in line, not mocking someone else, not making noise while others are concentrating — teachers make these demands of children to protect others' rights. Such restrictions are not paternalistic; justification requires neither a benefit to the child nor the child's reflective endorsement.

Discipline not directed toward the well-being of others, however, *is* paternalistic and therefore does require justification as outlined previously. Paying attention to the explanation, completing the assignment, studying for the test, participating in the group project, and taking part in activities designed by one's peers all fall into this category. Does willing compliance indicate that the teacher's intervention satisfies Dworkin's requirements in such cases?

Compliance based on a duty to learn clearly meets this standard. Since the teacher believes the child will benefit, the conscientious-intervention requirement is satisfied. The child's recognition that s/he ought to engage in the activity amounts to reflective endorsement. Absent mistake or deception, such endorsements would presumably be affirmed later when the child's rational powers are more fully developed.

What if the teacher is wrong, or the child thinks so? Adult error alone does not violate the conscientious-intervention proviso and thus does not affect justification. However, the teacher must consider the child's objection in good faith; dismissing it out of hand would violate the proviso. Ironically, the teacher who reconsiders would appear to be in a stronger position than the teacher who is right but adamantly refuses to consider objections. This supports our intuition that open-mindedness in a teacher is more important than being right in particular circumstances.

Some might contest this conclusion on the grounds that it justifies too much control by the teacher. It has been argued that children's capacities vary widely and some are as well equipped to look after their own interests as most adults; restrictions should only be imposed when children make choices clearly harmful to their future interests.[13] The "clearly harmful" criterion, however, is probably too strong; strict application would lead us to reject compulsory education altogether, a conclusion most would not accept.

The capacities argument can be approached in a more nuanced way. Kohn, for example, argues that children should be given as much choice as they can

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responsibly exercise and the teacher can effectively manage.[14] Kohn would presumably reject the picture of the teacher imposing learning routines, even if justified. Why not let students choose among several routines that lead to the same outcome? Why not let students design their own activity that leads to the outcome? Why not let them choose among several permissible outcomes?

Kohn's critique modifies the account of the learning routine, but leaves intact the basic idea of willing compliance based on duty. The democratic-classroom model does not eliminate the need to justify paternalistic intervention. First, even for the most responsible students, options are still limited and the selection procedure is guided by adults. Mild as it is, this type of intervention is still paternalistic and requires justification. Second, assuming the teacher enforces the students' decision, a collective choice constrains individual students, and that constraint requires justification. The will of the majority does not generate political obligation in a classroom the way it does in a nation. Democratic classrooms, in short, require the same moral arguments as when the learning routine is imposed by the teacher, even though the hurdle of student resistance will likely not be as high.

Appealing to students' underlying duty to learn, in short, plays a large role in justifying paternalistic restrictions in both traditional and democratic classrooms. But does the fact that students enjoy an activity affect the teacher's burden of justification?

The basic appeal of enjoyment, from the teacher's point of view, is that doing an activity generates the desire either to keep on doing it or to do it again in the future. Ideally this mechanism would be a sufficient motivation, and thus teachers' burden of control is relieved. Without paternalistic intervention, the requirement of justification is eliminated. If students like what they are doing, do teachers need to worry about reflective endorsement? Does anyone care about the teacher's conscientious belief when students are happily occupied? This line of reasoning does occasionally get raised for tried-and-true activities that students look forward to and supervisors are loath to question even though their educational value is dubious. But is this view plausible?

As we have seen, the reality of "enjoyable classroom activities" often falls short of the ideal. Grumbling and lethargy must be overcome to get an activity started, and there are always a few students who just don't enjoy it. Their cooperation is secured by other means. Those other means usually involve paternalistic control and hence demand justification.

Even if universal enthusiasm prevails, however, the teacher's immunity from giving justifications seems suspect. Why jettison reflective endorsement and conscientious belief just because students are having a good time? School isn't camp. Students don't have a choice about being there. Taxpayers expect more for their money than mere entertainment. While enjoyment reduces motivational hurdles, the justificatory demands cannot be avoided. If there is no way to avoid justification, it should be articulated to the students. If they should tire of an activity, they could be reminded that they have a duty to participate anyway.

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This dual-track approach is standard practice for thoughtful teachers. They try to design activities that help children learn but that are enjoyable at the same time. Democratic strategies trade on this motivational structure, even if this is not acknowledged. Students are the experts on enjoyment, teachers on duty. When students and teachers plan collaboratively they draw on expertise in both areas.

Success in this enterprise, however, is not straightforward. Consider a fourth grade science project designed to teach about simple electrical circuits. Using cardboard, tinfoil, and electrical supplies, children are instructed to build a fantastic creature whose eyes light up. The first class period is spent on the body, the second on circuitry for the eyes, and only this latter period fulfills the educational aim of learning about circuits. Although building the body might release children's creativity or help them learn about geometric shapes, that is not the explicit purpose of the lesson. Because the two parts of the activity are separable, duty and enjoyment come apart and justification is undermined. While this problem can be avoided by incorporating an educational aim in the design of the creature's body, this solution highlights the importance of tightly interweaving the enjoyable and educational aspects of an activity. If they are separable, the two strands of motivation come apart and the legitimacy of the teacher's expectation is cast into question.

The dual-track approach is a highly serviceable strategy for dealing with challenges not only from students, but also from parents, supervisors, and a skeptical citizenry. It could also be construed as an answer to one influential postmodern critique of contemporary classroom practices. Aaron Schutz, for example, refers to the progressive educational environment advocated by Kohn and others as a "velvet cage," a form of "pastoral control" in which the agency of control is "is distributed throughout the environment instead of located in (apparently) identifiable figures or systems." Domination is subtle rather than overt, and thus "extremely difficult for participants to detect or resist."[15] But does the teacher who encourages and supports student decision making really seek to disguise his or her authority?

Teachers who adopt the dual-track approach remind students that activities they enjoy do have an educational purpose. If most students cooperate, teachers may not need to assert their authority, but it isn't disguised or smuggled in under false pretenses. Indeed, the velvet cage argument seems more applicable to classrooms where teachers are ostensibly immunized against demands for justification, either because students are involved in decision making or because they enjoy the activities planned by the teacher.

Conclusion

Like much terminology in educational discourse, "student engagement" operates at two levels. On an idealistic plane, it is associated with curiosity, interest, enthusiasm, self-initiated activity, and self-directed learning. On a practical plane, it refers to on-task behavior and willing compliance. Clearly there is overlap between these usages. Teachers, parents, and administrators would like students to be curious, interested, enthusiastic, self-starting, and self-managing. To demand consistent display of these characteristics, however, is unrealistic. Willing

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compliance — completing teacher-assigned tasks without continual bribes, threats, or reminders — is ordinarily sufficient to generate learning and therefore to count as engagement. That is the basic construct examined in this essay.

Three distinct objections were raised about compliance. First, some argue that it entails subordination to adults in situations where this is not essential to the child's well-being. Second, some object that this account justifies suboptimal learning conditions. Third, willing compliance could be construed as a version of the velvet cage scenario. All three of these arguments have some elements of truth, but they are not germane to the account of motivation and justification presented here.

Although the essay offers an expansive view of teachers' authority, it does not construe this authority as unlimited or immune to challenges by students and parents. Teachers are not at liberty to impose activities that do not lead to learning. Nor, under the conscientious-belief proviso, are they free to dismiss students' objections to an assignment without thoughtful consideration.

Some teachers and educational theorists have sought to evade the justificatory burden by seeking either directly or indirectly to motivate students by enjoyment. This essay concludes that, however desirable enjoyment might be, it does not preempt the need for justification. When a student resists, appeals to enjoyment are a dead end.

The appeal to duty and the underlying justificatory demand on teachers are important not solely because of their contribution to willing compliance, but also because of the moral discourse they generate. This discourse is important in its own right, because it builds students' capacities for moral reasoning and it helps them feel the force of moral motivation. Though Schutz doesn't mention it, the absence of moral discourse is one of the most conspicuous defects of the velvet cage, in which students have the illusion of choosing in an environment that adults plan for them. To paraphrase Peter Strawson, pastoral control embodies an attitude in which persons are treated as objects to be manipulated, rather than subjects who can be held responsible.[16] When teachers appeal to the duty to learn, they implicitly recognize students' moral agency, their capacity to be motivated by moral considerations. Ironically, by demanding compliance, teachers invite students into the adult moral community.

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1. Ellen A. Skinner and Michael J. Belmont, "Motivation in the Classroom: Reciprocal Effects of Teacher Behavior and Student Engagement Across the School Year," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 85, no. 4 (1993): 571–81. Jennifer A. Fredricks, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Alison H. Paris provide an overview of the concept and its use in research in "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1 (2004): 59–109.

2. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

3. Alfie Kohn, *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996).

4. "Child," for present purposes, includes all school-age students, and arguments in this essay apply across grade levels. Differences in the tone and language of appeals to adolescents and to younger children are to be taken as read.

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5. See, for example, Marcus Singer, "On Duties to Oneself," *Ethics* 69, no. 3 (1959): 202–5; and G.B. Watson, "Contractualism and the Boundaries of Morality: Remarks on Scanlon's 'What We Owe to Each Other,'" *Social Theory and Practice* 28, no. 2 (2002): 221–41.

6. A fuller discussion can be found in Charles Howell, "Education, Punishment, and Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000). For case studies in classroom settings, see Philip W. Jackson, Robert E. Boostrom, and David T. Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

7. Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

8. John Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study in Academic Disengagement* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

9. Richard Warner, "Enjoyment," *Philosophical Review* 89, no. 4 (1980): 507–26; and Richard Warner, *Freedom, Enjoyment, and Happiness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

10. Wayne Davis, "A Causal Theory of Enjoyment," *Mind* 91, no. 362 (1982): 240–56.

11. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975).

12. Gerald Dworkin, "Paternalism," *Monist* 56, no. 1 (1972): 64–84.

13. See, for example, John Holt, *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Youth* (New York: Dutton, 1974); and Leonard I. Krimmerman, "Compulsory Education: A Moral Critique," in *Ethics and Educational Policy*, eds. Kenneth A. Strike and Kieran Egan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

14. Alfie Kohn, "Choices for Children: How and Why to Let Children Decide," *Phi Delta Kappan* 75, no. 1 (1993): 8–25.

15. Aaron Schutz, "Rethinking Domination and Resistance: Challenging Postmodernism," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 1 (2004): 15–23.

16. Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25.

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