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The Voice of Gifted Students on Triggered and Maintained Engagement with Learning at School

Saskia Snikkers-Mommer
ORCID: 0000 0001 5821 2856
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Alexander Minnaert
ORCID: 0000-0003-3886-1634
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Aziza Mayo
NIVOZ Rotterdam

ABSTRACT

Although gifted students might exhibit strong task involvement, their engagement in learning at school is not a given. In this qualitative study, three in-depth case studies were used to explore what, according to the gifted students' voices, is needed to become and to remain engaged in learning at school. The interview data were analyzed inductively and deductively with an eye toward general patterns and differences that became evident in students' experiences. The results showed that it is essential for gifted students to be seen to become engaged. Students unfold that the fulfilment of the basic psychological needs and, in particular, the experience of an autonomy-supportive environment is crucial. Moreover, they tell us that both the educational context and themselves can be facilitating or hindering factors. To remain engaged when faced with challenges, gifted students need to feel competent, which requires structure tailored to their needs. Implications for educational practice are discussed.

Keywords: engagement, giftedness, motivation, autonomy support, structure, student voices.

Anyone observing in a classroom will see that when students are confronted with a task, some always start working immediately. In all schools, there are also students for whom it takes some time to start, while some drop out halfway through the task, not only because it is difficult - for instance - but precisely when it offers too little challenge [1]. In short, every school has students who can be engaged but can also show disengagement towards learning [2].

Although gifted students might show strong task orientation [3-4] and strong commitment to school [5], they might also be far from committed at school, feel uninvolved in lessons, underperform, have work ethic problems [6] or even drop out from school [7-8].

Research by Reis and Renzulli [9] on the development of giftedness shows that personality, environmental, school, home, and coincidental factors all interact with achievement potential

[10-12]. Potential can develop if factors in the social or wider environment do justice to giftedness and (continue to) support the students' growth potential [13]. When educational disadvantage(s), family factors, physical or psychological problems, or learning difficulties play a role, gifted learners might be unable to develop their potential to the maximum [14].

So, what is needed for gifted students to harness the strong task orientation and commitment to school that is *potentially* present to become engaged with learning in school?

It is socially relevant to obtain answers to this question to prevent the loss of learning potential, thus triggering and maintaining engagement with learning at school. There is compelling empirical evidence of a positive relationship between engagement, school performance, and school behavior, whereby students who are engaged are more likely to achieve higher grades and are less likely to drop out [e.g., 2, 15-16].

Engagement is thus important for learning, although teachers regularly report that they do not sufficiently succeed in guiding gifted students to become and remain engaged with learning [17-18].

The starting point in this research is the student him-/herself. To do justice to the voice of the gifted child, open listening to what is needed from his or her experience to become and remain engaged in learning at school is essential.

In this article first we unfold an integrative overview of each gifted student who participated in this study, compiled on the basis of transcripts and observations. We then look at general patterns and differences between these gifted students in what they say they need in order to become and remain engaged in learning at school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Engagement[1] is seen as a multidimensional construct with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components [2, 19-20]. Put simply, *engagement* involves active involvement in a task or activity [21], being seen as "energy in action" as it reflects the connection between the person and activity [22].

Minnaert [8] and Appleton et al. [2] describe engagement as a construct influenced by both the child him-/herself and the context, based on the Self-Determination Theory.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a motivation theory on growth and personality functioning [23-25], exploring factors that support or undermine individuals' motivation, vitality, and development [26]. According to SDT, the fulfilment of basic psychological needs - namely the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness - is considered fundamental for individuals' development. In education, concepts from SDT are widely used because they offer concrete tools for teachers[8, 27, 28]. Moreover, De Boer et al. [29] describe SDT as a theoretical framework that adds value to investigate characteristics of optimal learning environments that are conducive for gifted learners.

This study uses the concept of engagement as the active involvement in school tasks and activities, featuring cognitive, behavioral and/or emotional components, and influenced by

factors in both the child and his/her context. Becoming engaged is about the externalization of motivation, moving towards active engagement [30]. Remaining engaged is about maintaining engagement even at times when tasks become more difficult and evoke resistance or are too easy, leading to boredom.

Different definitions of *giftedness* are regularly used in both the scientific literature and educational practice [4, 31-33]. Regardless of the exact definitions, there seems to be some agreement on several characteristic aspects of giftedness. Renzulli [3] and Ziegler and Heller [4]speak of giftedness when high intelligence is accompanied by both a high degree of creativity and a strong task orientation. However, as described, it is often not obvious for gifted learners to become and remain engaged in work [1, 17-18]. Research shows that engagement is at variance among gifted students [18, 34], which is why it is necessary to look at the experiences of gifted students.

Despite many studies on engagement [e.g., 2, 5, 35], empirical research exploring relevant factors for gifted learners from the child's perspective remains limited [18]. Studies on what gifted students need for learning at school emphasize the importance of tailoring educational provision to the students' specific needs and abilities [e.g. 5, 35-37].

Recent research suggests that there is a difference in what gifted students need to become engaged in learning at school compared to the needs of students of average intelligence [18], although no known studies detailing what the unique gifted child him-/herself needs. As indicated, this study focuses on the voice of the gifted child to answer the research question*: What is needed in the gifted student's experience to become and remain engaged in learning at school?*

METHOD

We explored three case studies to do justice to the perspective of gifted students and listen to their experience of becoming and remaining engaged in learning at school. In this qualitative, phenomenological study, the "lived experiences" were at the core of this study [38], emphasizing on first-person perspectives and providing a way to explore these lived experiences in greater depth [39].

We looked at the direct involvement, experiences and choices of the respondents, as described, because there is considerable variation in engagement among gifted students. The aim of this phenomenological research is not to understand the lived experiences of individuals as facts, but to determine the comprehensible meaning of such experiences [40]. The focus was placed on listening with an open attitude to what factors in both the child and his/her context play a relevant role.

Participants

The respondents were students from the first author's school psychology practice (sample of convenience). In selecting the respondents, an a priori contrast was sought between the three cases, with respondents being selected who were highly committed to learning, and for whom it was not a given. In her role as a school psychologist, the researcher was asked by the school and parents to help think about appropriate educational provision in the regular educational setting, where these students were essentially functioning well. However, due to their

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giftedness, there were questions about matching the educational offer to the specific educational needs of these students. The school psychologist, who occupies an independent position, was a trusted presence in the school among both the children and the teachers and parents involved.

The respondents were 8 or 10 years old at the start of the study (see Table 1). They included two girls and one boy, each of whom is educated at a different school.

Table 1: Respondents (N=3)

Respondent*	**Eric**	**Judith**	**Pien**
age (start)	10 year	10 year	8 year
gender	male	female	female
school career	regular	acceleration	acceleration
educational programme	enrichment class	enrichment class	enrichment class/DWS[a]

Note. The names in this study have been pseudonymized for privacy reasons

[a] DWS: Day a Week School, One day a week in an external class with gifted students, following challenging lessons

Procedure

Prior to the study, it was explained that the responses would be processed anonymously and that participation was voluntary at all times. The respondents and their parents were informed about the study's objectives and actively consented to participate.

Each respondent was interviewed three times over a two-year period. Each interview lasted 25 to 75 minutes, depending on the input. They were conducted during school hours, in a quiet, familiar place for the students at school.

To minimize social desirability bias, it was stressed that all answers are valuable and that it was important for the study to learn the children's personal experiences.

Audio recordings of the interviews were conducted and the complete raw audio material was transcribed verbatim. A written integrative overview of each student was compiled based on the transcriptions and observations. The ethics committee of the Graduate School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen (The Netherlands) approved the research model (April 2021).

Assessment Instruments

When selecting the assessment instruments, we tried to remain as close as possible to the student's experiences. In order to gain a nuanced understanding of what these students need to become and remain engaged, they were first observed at school at least three times during a one-month period by the first author in her role as a school psychologist, during language and maths lessons, as well as breaks. Specific attention was paid to the moments when students were engaged in a task or activity or not, as well as how they interacted with their environment.

The observations allowed the researcher to become familiar with the student in the classroom setting. Moreover, the observations were used to make the interviews child-specific, i.e. examples from the observations were used to ask further questions during the interviews. The interviews were conducted following the observations. Because both the child him-/herself and

the context can influence engagement[2, 8, 41-42], this starting point was used as a foundation for the interviews. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to gain insights into the child's experience and context (see Appendix A). Personal experiences and examples from the classroom were requested for each time, so that the researcher could empathize with each student's environment as much as possible [43], and thus high ecological validity was sought [44].

After the research question was formulated, sensitizing concepts were identified from the literature (factors related to the *child* or *context,* and *becoming* and *remaining engaged)*, as global insights that initially guided the interviews but were adapted to the child's situation [43]. The sensitizing concepts which were known from the literature (need for relatedness, competence, autonomy, involvement, structure, and autonomy support), supplemented by themes brought up by the children, were focal points when further questioning during the interviews *("You say that teacher 'has to do most of it to enjoy going to school, but you yourself also a bit'. Can you explain that to me more precisely?")*

Each time, space was given for learner input by asking open-ended questions *("Are there any other issues that are important to you? If so, which ones?"),* and each time, questions were asked in response to the points that the learners brought in *("What exactly do you mean when you say it's important for the teacher to 'give you a bit of freedom'?"*).

Three vignettes (see Appendix B) were presented to the students during the second interview that were not directly about the child him-/herself, to deepen the respondents' answers and reduce the likelihood of socially desirable answers [45]. The vignettes were developed based on previous observations of several gifted students and several teachers from a few classes in different schools. The vignettes described examples of engagement that were appealing to the students, which covered both context and child factors, as well as the main themes. These themes were observed by the researcher during several observations and then rewritten as an integrated picture to ensure anonymity. These vignettes were presented to each student during the second round of interviews, whereby the researcher interacted with the students about the recognizability of the situation depicted *("I see you have to smile: would you like to tell me why?")* They invariable sought to explore what is going on under the surface, what helps or hinders these children, where you have to look further to see it, or listen more attentively to hear it *("You say, 'You may think I can choose, well, ho but', what do you mean by that?"*). If children spontaneously discussed factors involved in disengagement, this was included in the analyses.

Data Analysis

First, respondents' portraits were written, before being analyzed inductively and then deductively. This involved looking for general patterns and then differences between students. From an open perspective, the voice of the child was listened to, whereby the students' perceptions were always placed at the center. However, this was combined with scientific prior knowledge and experience, with the students' answers interpreted in SDT frameworks during the analyses, as indicated earlier. This covered the concepts of relatedness, competence, autonomy and involvement, structure, and autonomy support. In order to subsequently interpret the data in greater detail after the inductive analysis, deductive analyses were conducted (see Appendix C), thus invoking SDT [23]. To answer the research question, the data from each case were analyzed separately. First, respondents' answers were carefully read and

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reread several times. Next, content categories were identified by arranging the raw material at a global level. The main themes and concepts that the students brought in, the role of the child him-/herself and the context, and becoming and remaining engaged were examined. Next was organizing by looking at relationships and patterns in the arrangement made. Finally, it was explored which similarities and differences became apparent in the students' perceptions. The analyses were discussed with the co-authors until agreement was reached on the general patterns and differences visible from the data.[2]

RESULTS

The findings focus on what it takes from the experience of these three gifted students to become and remain engaged in school learning. After outlining the integrative overview from students' perceptions based on the observations and interviews, we focus on general patterns that become visible and then describe differences between students. Here, we distinguish between what it takes them to become and remain engaged. Finally, we explore general patterns and differences that become visible regarding disengagement.

Integrative Overview

Eric: "I'll Just Be Very Honest, I Never Really Go To School Thinking 'Yay!!!'":

Eric is a bright, enthusiastic, ten-year-old boy with a broad range of interests. He is full of creative ideas, good at languages, and loves writing his own stories: *"I think it's super fun to put my own fantasies into it"*.

Eric responds openly to the questions during the interviews, and he is good at putting into words the things that help him to learn. Without prompting, he also talks about what hinders him, as Eric does not really enjoy going to school.

Eric can work diligently at school, especially in language assignments where he can express his creativity. If Eric understands what he has to do, he can enjoy working: *"Someone came to help me once and he only said one word… and I got it all. Then I finished my math's work in two minutes".* He can "work faster and better" if a task is "fun", or if he gets to do something fun after the task: *"Or if I'm allowed to go for a run outside. Have a little... wind in my face... when I need to get out of that... classroom for a while.... Just… a short run and a change of scenery and then... it may help me to return and continue with some new energy".*

Eric can start working enthusiastically, although there are regular moments when he throws in the towel and secretly does "his own thing": *"Look, if you put your book in your tray like this... the teacher can't see it and you can have a good read...".* When Eric is urged to get to work but cannot set himself to it, a conflict with the teacher can arise.

Eric says that he is afraid of making mistakes: *"If it gets hard, I quit, stupidly enough"... "If there's something I don't understand, I go and have my secret read - not interested, bye, bye!"... "First I will check hundreds of times to see if I really don't get it. Well, I don't, so… bye bye!".*

At that point, receiving explanations can help: *"Explanations, that's what I would like most. But, well, the teachers never explain it to me in a good way".*

Sometimes, there are moments when - despite the difficulty - he manages to remain focused on his work. Eric's decision to take things on plays an important role in this: *"It was just…, at one point I really thought, yes, it would be nice to actually learn it. ... And wham! I learned it". ... "I said: 'We're going to calculate fractions now!'.... And then we got cracking and I learned some new things again. And that was pretty cool".*

Eric likes to set his own course, but also enjoys collaboration: *"That we can work together and exchange answers, I quite like that".*

Eric thinks that it is important for a teacher to be nice. His relationship with his teachers varies, which bothers him: *"With teacher 1 it's super easy to get to work. I really like that teacher"... "But I don't really like teacher 2, I think she's a bit of a scaredy-cat"... "She hardly lets me do anything".* Eric wants to remain in charge and he likes being allowed to co-determine his activities: *"I would like to have a lot of room to choose. I mean... to make my own daily schedule... and just do something fun once in a while".*

Eric says that the teachers never ask him anything and that there is hardly any room to make choices, which makes him angry and affects his ability to work well. He feels that he is not seen, which is a sensitive issue for him. Eric draws a small doll with an angry face and says: *"Look, this is how I always feel when they don't give me any space again"... "None of the teachers ever let us choose anything"... "I wish she would give me more room. But she doesn't, so, well...".* Eric says that it is particularly the teacher who has the task of improving the cooperation between them so that he can work better in class: *"Well... I think the teacher should make the greatest effort*". Nonetheless, he also sees a role for himself here, saying (after some thought): "*Of course, there is something I have to do myself. I could be a little friendlier. Actually, I should... give her a little more room than I am actually giving her now*".

Judith: "... Always Feel Like Doing Things":

Judith is a bright, optimistic, and confident 10-year-old girl. During the interviews, she gives nuanced answers to the questions. Judith enjoys going to school and actually always feels like doing things. She believes that this is partly due to the enthusiastic attitude of the teacher Judith had for several years since grade 1: *"She was enthusiastic about everything, and taught in a fun way. And yes, I got enthusiastic too.".... "My teacher enjoyed life... so then…, with arithmetic, oh fun, and then with language we did all kinds of fun things and that made it fun too. ... I really liked that, so I hung on to that and still do".*

Judith loves learning, especially new learning and challenging tasks: *"Like getting math problems you don't understand straightaway.... I'm glad I've been given difficult problems because I've learned to learn. And I like that more than... not learning".*

Judith is good at starting tasks and excellent at persevering: *"No, I don't get distracted. If I am working on a math problem, I am, well, working on that. And I also want to finish my weekly task*". For Judith, explanations are very important to help her set about work, although they need to leave room for her brain to work things out on her own: *"So I like them to explain just about half*". Judith likes to have things finished to get them out of her head, and deadlines help her with this.

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Judith gets on well with her teachers and classmates, and she feels valued and seen. She is happy with the positive relationship that she has with the teacher, and she says with a sparkle in her eyes: *"That's nice, making contact. A teacher pulling faces is actually ... quite cool"... "My classmates accept me. I like that because ... well, then I feel more at home".*

While Judith does not often find assignments difficult, not (immediately) understanding them is an awkward feeling that makes her 'choke up'.

These are times when she needs tailor-made explanations: *"Even if I get a book in front of me and think, 'wow, I can't get to work if I don't understand it', so I want explanations, but not so much that I don't have to think for myself".*

Judith does not find it difficult to ask for help: "the desire to understand is greater than the effort to ask for help". When she has eventually finished her task, Judith is proud, especially if she had to put in the effort: *"If it's too easy, you're not so proud of it and that's no fun. It's fun when you're proud of it".* She uses the metaphor of the learning pit, that you have to plough through on a bicycle, working your way very slowly when tasks get tough: *"If you don't go fast you have to paddle on and that's okay... to learn, to actually be able to make your way through it. That I don't [feel like].... I can't manage and I can't stand it! …but that I persevere, that I get out. And when I've made my way through, I actually feel really happy – yes, I can do this!".*

Judith is good at encouraging herself and choosing a strategy when assignments are more difficult: *"Then I would skip the task and return to it later with my father, mother, or teacher".*

Judith skipped a class and she feels less stressed about making mistakes in the new group. She has become better at putting things into perspective after receiving help from her parents and teacher: *"Sometimes I thought, 'I can't finish, I don't understand it', and then I got all panicky" ... "My parents had said, like, 'that's no problem at all, because those children are already very old and you are still very young. That's very natural that you don't get it.' I didn't understand at first. But now I do". ... "I missed out on a whole year of learning, they didn't, so, yes. I don't care that much [anymore]; I won't cry with every sum, no". ... "Now I think: 'Oh, too bad, a mistake, ...who cares'. I'm learning, so…".*

Judith seems naturally committed to learning at school, although there are also times when she abandons the effort, especially when she gets bored: *"Someone in the previous class only had to explain something to me once and then I got it. And then it was repeated all the time and then I thought: 'Oh no... not again! I can already do this'. That's when I stopped enjoying myself and thought, 'oh please no, I already understand this'".*

Pien: "When It's Boring, A Knot of Anger Starts Building Up Inside Me That No One Sees": Pien is a sweet, positive, somewhat timid eight-year-old girl. She is modest and does not easily show herself. It is sometimes difficult for her to put into words what is important to her for engaged learning, although her eyes twinkle during the interviews. Pien usually enjoys going to school and she learns easily.

In class, Pien always starts eagerly when given an assignment, and she is also good at persevering at times when tasks become difficult. Her work attitude, independence, and focus are always positive. Pien is dutiful and completes all assignments, but shows little enthusiasm for tasks that do not match her level or fail to give her room to choose: *"Even if it's not fun, I still work hard"... "I don't mind doing the things I have to do, but I like choosing even more"*.

Pien needs challenges to enjoy assignments: *"I like difficult assignments better than easy ones, because difficult ones make you learn. If lessons are interesting, I listen very carefully and then it is also fun to listen".*

Pien also needs specific explanations: *"A good teacher for gifted children is a teacher who challenges them and can adapt the learning matter for children who find it easy or, in fact, very difficult".* Especially when tasks become difficult, Pien needs tailor-made explanations: *"So that they help you and explain... and then so... [in the subject of technology] you have to figure it out yourself, but they do make sure they explain it so that you won't do something dangerous. But just, if you ask something they will help you. ...So giving an assignment that I can figure out on my own, but with the teacher standing by to provide explanations if necessary.*

Pien always starts on her own and when assignments are difficult, she will eventually ask for help, even though it takes some effort: *"First I'll try by myself and if it doesn't work twice, I'll ask the teacher"... "Asking for help... is difficult, but I do it sometimes, when I think, like... I really want something else to do now. Or if I can't manage. I ask nowadays".*

For Pien, it is important that the teacher and the children are nice: *"Kind and sweet...and not strict...that helps to be able to work".* She likes working on assignments with friends: *"If I don't understand it, they explain it to me and I to them"*.

Even when lessons are boring and tedious, she goes about her work outwardly impassively: *"When the teacher starts explaining and I already understand. I could actually start but have to wait a very long time"... "If they provide a lot of well... just information and then keep saying the same thing".* At those moments, no one notices that Pien becomes angry due to boredom: *"A knot of anger starts building up inside me that no one sees. Nobody knows, only me"*. Pien says that the knot of anger 'erupts' two or three times a week at home, although she is never "bothered by knots of anger" on the days when she goes to the day-a-week school (DWS, attending a class of gifted students one day a week, and four days in her own group). *"You get difficult assignments there, exactly the right explanations - and you are allowed to collaborate!"*

Engagement

As essential factors for engagement in a general sense, all students indicate - in their own words - the importance of being seen and the need to fulfill their basic psychological needs. In this respect, factors relating to both the child and the context play a role. It is important for them to feel competent *("The feeling that I can do it, that ... I just want to have that more often. Of yes, flawless!")*, experience autonomy *("That I can do it my own way")*, and feel socially connected *("That I am ... accepted")*. To be nurtured in their basic psychological needs, these students need support from the context by being given structure *("Yes, I do need half an explanation")*, an autonomy-supportive environment *("That teacher gives me some space for my own plans"),* and teacher involvement *("So that teacher is being nice and knows what I can do well")*. These factors

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apply to all students, although *differences in emphasis* become apparent in how emphatically, intensely, or frequently the need for structure, autonomy support, and involvement are mentioned.

General Patterns of Becoming Engaged:

Providing an *autonomy-supportive* environment is a factor that the learners emphatically mention to become engaged. This relates to curriculum provision that offers choices *("Just, that you get to choose"*), gives space to their areas of interest, and is challenging and tailored to these students *("That you think hey, that's something new and a bit difficult")*. Students report that tasks "get easier as they get harder", which has a positive effect on their work attitude as it helps them listen and concentrate better. Besides being challenged, being allowed to work at their own pace, feeling seen in their ambitions, and being given room for initiative *("That you are allowed to co-determine")* are keys to maximizing their engagement.

Individual Differences in Becoming Engaged:

When exploring differences between students in their perceptions of what is needed to *become* engaged, some students place a stronger emphasis on contextual factors, while for others the student him-/herself plays a more central role in this.

Each of the students interviewed have become committed to learning at school, but with Pien the emphasis for this seems to be more strongly placed on contextual factors and especially appropriate didactic curriculum, while with Eric and Judith intrinsic factors and personal beliefs play a very strong role, whereby they play an active, 'self'-directing role in this based on a desire for ownership *("I really thought like this, that would be fun to actually learn it. And bam! Then I really learned it").*

Students also mention unique factors that specifically contribute to becoming engaged: competition and play are important for Eric, while Pien explicitly mentions the need for quiet in the classroom as a prerequisite for engagement *("When I start, I have to concentrate first")*. Judith finds humor in interaction with the teacher important *"to be able to make sense of the work"*.

Translating the general patterns for what students find important to become engaged and more specifically what autonomy support looks like for a specific child requires pedagogical customization. For Judith, providing an open assignment will suffice, while Eric needs a teacher who sits down next to him and engages with him in a conversation about what he wants to learn and how to go about it.

General Patterns of Maintained Engagement:

Looking at what is important in the eyes of the students to maintain engagement, it becomes visible that this differs from what they indicate they need to become engaged.

Two factors play a prominent role in this, whereby the children explicitly mention the need for *competence*, which requires *structure* in the form of explanations. All students explicitly indicate that when tasks become difficult, they try by themselves first but then need structure from the teacher if they cannot figure it out. However, the structure should be tailored to their needs *("Half an explanation is enough for me").*

Asking for help is difficult for some students, as sometimes an internal battle precedes this because they feel they should be able to solve it themselves, or they might know but not yet be able to, and place high demands on themselves in this respect *("I was really playing out a fierce battle in my head. 'To do or not to do, to do or not to do...'").* The help offered or not at the moment when the child has a question and dares to ask it is crucial in the process of whether the child is willing and able to take the next step in the thinking process by him-/herself or alternatively drops out. This indicates that student's engagement is not stable but rather requires continuous attention and attunement. Engagement fluctuates from child to child over time, as the various observations have revealed. Within the same lesson hour, engagement can flare up and/or fade out, prompted by a clue from a teacher, a joke from a classmate, or the mood of the student him-/herself. It can suddenly be affected either positively or negatively by both internal and external factors.

Individual Differences in Maintained Engagement:

The stories of our students unfold that whether students persevere or drop out at times when they experience resistance is a delicate balancing point. Judith and Pien show an inner drive to go the extra mile at those moments, indicating that their perseverance is important, and they actively encourage themselves. Judith also indicates that her parents and teacher are supportive in this, giving her confidence and teaching her to put things into perspective. Pien and Judith only ask for help when it is strictly necessary as they prefer to try first whether they can achieve something without help. In Pien's case, this leads to inner frustration and tension. The students need the confidence that they can learn as well as structure that supports and challenges them to continue thinking for themselves. For Eric, structure is the key to getting back on track when things are challenging, although asking for help is difficult for him *("I, stupidly, prefer to walk around it"... "Yet I actually need explanations then").* Providing structure also requires customization and coordination.

Disengagement

Because the students spontaneously mention factors driving disengagement, these are described in the students' own words. For students, disengagement refers to dropping out or becoming disconnected from the activity. For them, the causes lie in the difficulty of taking on challenges as well as the experience of a lack of challenge, aligning with findings in existing studies [47].

General Patterns of Disengagement:

Each student spontaneously mention factors contributing to disengagement. They described moments when they can no longer connect with a task, become frustrated, and drop out. The students agree that experiencing the lack of an autonomy-supportive environment can lead to disengagement, as they mentioned it emphatically and intensely. This appears to an insufficient connection between both didactic and pedagogical educational provision and the developmental drive of these students*: "I cannot move forward if the brakes are kept on".*

Individual Differences in Disengagement:

Whereas there is strong agreement among the students regarding the factors that play a role in becoming and remaining engaged, the analyses of what triggers disengagement paint a more individual picture. For each student, different factors are mentioned that trigger disengagement: for Judith, it is mainly about the frustration of the need for autonomy and

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competence; for Eric, it is about the lack of connection and autonomy support; and for Pien, it is about frustration concerning the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

How disengagement manifests itself is diverse. In Pien's case, it strikes inward as those in her surroundings do not notice that she disengages, and only she experiences that 'knots of anger' arise inside her. On the other hand, Eric quits and angrily makes himself be heard when he feels he is not given sufficient space or is not heard.

Accordingly, what the lack of autonomy support looks like varies from student to student. For Eric, it is about experiencing insufficient space to choose and co-determine the order and content of assignments. Not feeling heard in the initiatives that he shows also plays a role in this. Judith and Pien experience that they are not given sufficient space for their initiatives and a curriculum that matches their extremely high learning pace and eagerness to learn. Repeating and waiting makes them desperate, causing them to drop out internally, even if they do not disrupt in class.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study has explored what is needed to become and maintain engaged in school learning based on the experiences of three gifted students. Each child speaks to us in their own words about the importance of feeling connected, of building confidence to learn and of *being seen for* who they are, what they can do, and what they need, even at times when engagement is not obvious. Children seem to feel seen especially during pedagogical interactions, which might seem minor yet hold strong significance for them *("When the teacher asked me that, I knew she did because she knows I can do that well").*

As aforementioned, the stories of Eric, Judith and Pien unfold that engagement is nurtured when basic psychological needs are met, whereas it can lead to disengagement if these are hindered.

These findings are in line with SDT [23, 28, 46]. Minnaert [8] and Stroet et al. [30] also conclude that learners' perceptions towards education aimed at fulfilling basic psychological needs are positively associated with their motivation and engagement.

For these gifted students, it is important to give them the space to be themselves, follow their own learning pace, and make their own choices. Put simply, in order to become engaged, they *particularly* need an autonomy-supportive environment that matches the unique child. Minnaert [8] explicitly states that concern for autonomy should be treated with utmost caution, requiring customization by the teacher to maintain a meaningful and tailored balance between excessive and insufficient autonomy. Autonomy support is important for all students, but for these gifted students it is an essential ingredient for becoming engaged *("So that I get to co-determine")*. To remain engaged, these students specifically require customized structure (*"So half an explanation, that my brain can crack"*). For teachers this requires an ongoing process of tuning into the child and to keep searching together with the child for the appropriate balance of the factors that contribute to engagement.

Recent research shows that an autonomy-supportive environment is important for gifted students to become engaged and that structure is important to remain engaged [18]. The

present study is fully in line with these findings, while additionally showing *what* autonomy support and structure look alike for these students and highlighting the importance of customization to truly engage in an appropriate approach.

Martens [27] describes SDT as a message of "hope and optimism" (p. 24) because the premise is that children naturally want to learn. While we also observe this urge in gifted learners, we also note that it can be a delicate balance whether they then become genuinely engaged and remain committed to learning or drop out *("Well, I don't get it, bye bye!")*.

Providing education that supports the fulfilment of basic psychological needs starts with understanding and connecting with a student [24]. Students need to be seen in their talents as well as in what they find difficult, emphasizing the importance of tailored encouragement to unleash their full potential [48].

Letschert-Grabbe [49] describes encouragement as a form of support that not only fits what the student needs at that moment but also further helps by offering something new or different aimed at strengthening the child's self-awareness and self-respect. Seeing the child in what her/she needs at what moment requires the teacher to look closely at the child, including precisely when tasks become difficult, because giving encouragement at those moments is important to move forward in the learning process *("If I don't understand one little thing, I'll right away"*). However, it is not natural for these students to ask for help because they know what needs to be done, but do not yet know how to do it themselves and they feel that asking for help equates to disqualifying themselves [50]. The challenge for the teacher is to become aware of this and to reach out for equitable helping-seeking. Determining the most appropriate manner is a crucial question because pedagogy is not about averages but rather the uniqueness of each child [51].

At times when needs for autonomy are thwarted *("Look, this is how angry I look when the teacher doesn't give me space again"*) and individual educational needs are not taken into account, children are at risk of dropping out *("Then it is repeated and then I think, oh nooo, not again, I can already do this")*. This is in line with research by Lens and Rand [52] showing that "ignoring individual cognitive differences has negative consequences for children's motivation and learning development, not only for children with difficulty learning but also the most intelligent students" (p.194).

An open mind is required to gain insights into what is happening beyond the surface, especially at those crucial moments, as well as listening to and talking with the child to ascertain their needs [53]. Martens [27] argues that "we need to look more closely at what is hidden, truly considering who students are" (p.24), including by entering into dialogue with the child [17]. The research findings described above indicate that SDT is an appropriate framework for this by looking at the individual in context. Accordingly, SDT can thus serve as a (listening) guide for conversations about (dis)engagement.

By having conversations with the student about what an autonomy-supportive environment looks like for him/her and how they benefit from structure, answers can be sought together, and the gifted child can be given new perspectives to trigger and maintain their engagement in learning.

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STRENGTH-WEAKNESS ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One strength of this study is that student voice was the focal point. The results offer an insight into the world of these students in terms of what is important for them to become and remain engaged in school learning in a way that questionnaires cannot capture. To avoid social desirable answers, in the interviews with the students we explicitly asked them what they thought about it.

Although the results are not generalizable to all gifted students, because of the small sample size, the qualitative research has allowed us to obtain highly detailed information based on the lived experiences of these unique children. Because engagement appears to fluctuate, further research disentangling within- and between-student variability in engagement and in the underlying basic psychological needs over time is highly requested [54]. This will pave the way even better to provide evidence-informed cues for teachers to monitor the waxing and waning of motivation over time [54].

One's environment plays an important role in becoming engaged [2, 8, 55]. Hence, those involved in pedagogy have a significant stake in whether or not students' flourish developmentally. Barbier [35] shows that teachers' frames of reference regarding cognitively gifted learners differ, whereby an important step for teachers' professional development is to make them aware of their beliefs. Further research providing detailed insights into pedagogical stakeholders' views on what is desirable for these gifted learners to become and remain engaged is therefore recommended. Since De Boer et al. [29] show that teachers generally meet the needs of competence and connectedness but do not yet sufficiently succeed in providing autonomy support and differentiation, it is important - especially for gifted learners - to receive guidance on this. Focusing on the interaction between the student and the teaching staff member will be able to provide necessary and valuable additional information on how to provide tailor-made and context-specific guidance for the unique gifted child.

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Notes

1. In line with the scientific literature, the English term (*dis*)*engagement* was chosen *as an externalization of motivation* [30]. This is more comprehensive than the Dutch term *engagement*, which only refers to commitment or involvement [56], or the term boredom/disengagement (as a translation of disengagement).
2. The data, analysis codes, and output are not freely accessible and cannot be shared for privacy reasons. If desired, the data can be requested from the first author upon explicit and reasoned request.

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Appendix 1: Translated Interview Guide

(original language is Dutch)

Interview Round 1:

1. Opening:
   - Greetings/introductions/acquaintances
   - *Investing time in putting the student at ease*
   - Explanation of purpose and duration of interview (possibility of break) and research
   - *Discuss/explain anonymity, emphasize that all answers are correct*
   - Explanation of reporting (recording equipment and notes).
   - *Request permission to record the interview.*
2. Implementation
   - Explain concept of Engagement* (*in children's language): link to observation(s).
   - *(I just saw you in class working so involved, etc.).*
   - Ask questions, clarify if necessary: check that student has the same concept in mind

   Interview questions:

   Main questions

   1. What do you need to **become** engaged* in school learning?

      Questioning and deepening after student input:

      Can you give an example of a situation?
      What or who helped you then?
      You mention this..., are there other things that are necessary for you?
      What can you do yourself, what can the environment do to support you?
      Personal experiences and classroom examples?

   2. And what do you need to **stay** engaged* in school learning?

      Also, for example, if you (have to) do a task that is not so fun, or (too) easy or (too) difficult?
      Can you give an example of that?
      What did you need at that time? Did you get it? What happened then?
      What can you do yourself, what can the environment do?
      Are there other things that are needed for you?
      Personal experiences and classroom examples?
3. Completion
   - Giving space for retrospection
   - *Do you have any questions for the interviewer?*
   - Thank the student for participating in the interview
   - Look ahead (upcoming interview) goodbye.
   - *Returning student to class.*

Interview Round 2:

1. Opening:
   - Greeting
   - Explanation of purpose and duration of interview (possibility of break) and research
   - *Discuss/explain anonymity, emphasize that all answers are correct*
   - Explanation of reporting (recording equipment and notes).
   - *Again, ask permission to record the interview.*

2. Implementation
   - Once again explain concept of Engagement* (*in children's language): connect to observation(s)
   - *(You were talking about.../I saw that..., etc.)*
   - Ask questions, clarify if necessary: check that student has the same concept in mind

   Interview questions:

   Main questions

   1. What do you need to **become** engaged* in school learning?

      Questioning and deepening after student input:

Can you give an example of a situation?
What or who helped you then?
You mention this..., are there other things that are necessary for you?
What exactly do you mean by that?

2. And what do you need to **stay** engaged* in school learning?

Also, for example, if you (have to) do a task that is not so fun, or (too) easy or (too) difficult?
Can you give an example?
What did you need at that time? Did you get it? What happened afterwards?
Are there other things that you need?

Introduction Vignettes
Reading out
Conversation with students about the recognizability of the situation depicted
Do you recognize this? What does/doesn't?
In what kind of situations?
What happened then?
I see that you..., can you tell me more about it?

3. Completion

- Giving space for retrospection
- *Do you have any questions for the interviewer?'*
- Thank the student for participating in the interview
- Look ahead (upcoming interview) goodbye.
- *Returning student to class.*

Interview Round 3

1. Opening:

- Greeting
- Explanation of purpose and duration of interview (possibility of break) and research
- *Discuss/explain anonymity, emphasize that all answers are correct*
- Explanation of reporting (notes).

2. Implementation

- Explaining the concept of Engagement* (*in children's language): linking to observation
- *(I just saw you in class working so involved, etc.).*
- Ask questions, clarify if necessary: check that student has the same concept in mind

Interview questions:
Main questions
See rounds 1 and 2
Summarize; you indicate this (round 1, round 2, round 3), are there any other things that are important to you? Or things that you think would be good to know if you're researching this?
Real-life examples?

3. Completion

- Giving space for retrospection
- *Do you have any questions for the interviewer?*
- Thank the student for participating in the interview, completion of research.
- *Returning student to class.*

General instruction interviewer:
Listen to the answers. Does it answer the question?
If not, explain the question again and ask it again.
Is the answer incomplete?
Then go on to ask.

Ask control questions to verify that you understood the questions.
From time to time, summarize the answers you heard and ask for confirmation.
Pay attention to body language and facial expressions: look beyond the surface.

Appendix 2 Vignettes

Vignette 1

The children are taking a regular dictation. Jim (age 9) finds dictation easy, he finds it boring to write down the words. Jim quickly writes down the words, in the time he has to wait he also writes a poem. He has to laugh at his own text, he lets his friend read it, who also has to laugh at it. The teacher does not see it, she is busy with the (instruction of the) dictation. Jim writes his poem, in between writing down the dictation words quickly, he is quite capable of doing two things at once. When the poem is finished, Jim lets the children sitting behind him read it, they have to laugh about it, too. Teacher asks what is funny, Jim shows the poem to read. Teacher laughs and says, "You are a poet. But now join the class again, you know!" Jim nods and says: "I do! I join the class AND I do my own work".

Vignette 2

Levie (age 10) usually enjoys going to school even though he sometimes has to wait a long time during explanations in class. With math and language he can start working right away, which he does quickly because then he has time left for his project. Recently he spoke with his teacher, which was a nice conversation. The teacher asked what he wanted to learn, he was allowed to choose from a number of things such as learning programming, Spanish or Chinese. Levie smiled and said: "I chose Chinese, that seems fun with those difficult characters. But it will be a while before we start because first my teacher has to find someone to teach me. Isn't it nice that she does that for me? And that you can choose it yourself here at school".

Vignette 3

Jessy (age 8) talks about the finest moment of the week in class. She says: "The best moment of the week was when the teacher asked me where she had stopped reading aloud in the book. I liked that moment because then I knew for sure, that my teacher knows I am good at that kind of things".

Appendix 3 Codebook