

## Chapter 11

# Promoting Agentic Engagement and Heutagogy in Tomer Elementary School in Beer Sheva, Israel

Haya Kaplan, Ilanit Bar-Tov, Amnon Glassner, & Shlomo Back

Heutagogy

Agentic Engagement

Self-Determination Theory

Elementary Education

*This chapter introduces a school-wide intervention program in Tomer Elementary School in Beer Sheva, Israel. The program emphasizes agentic engagement and self-determination among students and teachers by supporting their psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and implementing heutagogy. The teachers developed a wide range of methods for these aims, which are described in detail. The program was followed by a qualitative study in which students and teachers were interviewed. The results indicate meaningful conceptual and behavioral changes that occurred following the teachers' and students' psychological need support. While teachers emphasized the pedagogical contribution of the intervention, students highlighted the social aspect, focusing on the need for belongingness to their peers and teachers. The students' responses indicated a proactive approach to learning and to social life. They exhibited triple-loop reflections by reporting what they had learned of themselves as students and human beings. They also expressed a sense of autonomy and a sense of competence. The process was spiral and continuous, ranging over the entire school community. It was a gradual change along a consistent process encompassing both teachers and students. The results have implications for the implementation of Self-Determination Theory and heutagogy in the educational system.*

## Introduction

One additional aspect of engagement is Reeve's concept of *Agentic Engagement* (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020). Agentic Engagement refers to students' active involvement in their learning process, as they create their own need-supportive environment, set their own goals and strive to achieve them. It refers to "students' constructive contribution into the flow of instruction they receive" (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 258). Students who are agentially engaged are proactive; they communicate their preferences, ask questions, let their teachers know what they like, need, or want, and receive a response from their teachers. It is an, "ongoing series of dialectical transactions between student and teacher" (Reeve, 2013, p. 580).

Teachers' autonomy-support and the experience of need-satisfaction were found to be predictors of agentic engagement and other aspects of student engagement (Jang, Kim & Reeve, 2016; Matos, Reeve, Herrera & Claux, 2018; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic engagement predicted changes in perceived teacher autonomy-support, student need-satisfaction and self-efficacy throughout the year, and also predicted students' academic achievements (Matos et al.,

2018; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic engagement can also be achieved by employing heutagogy as a learning-teaching approach (Glassner & Back, 2020).

## **Heutagogy (self-determined learning)**

Following Hase and Kenyon (2013) and Blaschke et al. (2014), Glassner and Back (2020) applied heutagogy in college and university courses. Heutagogy is a student-centered learning approach in which the students, facilitated by a lecturer, determine their own learning. They decide what to study within the general topic of a course, as well as how to study and with whom. The process is followed by triple-loop reflections written by the students. Usually, they also choose how to evaluate the process and the outcomes of their learning and how to demonstrate and share the knowledge they have created. Analysis of students' reflections in Glassner and Back (2020) showed that the heutagogical learning satisfied the students' psychological needs for autonomy and competence. The authors found that "the most salient findings have been that heutagogy is student self-determined but teacher dependent. It presupposes a flexible teacher who is ready and able to trust the students and to maintain with them a genuine dialogue concerning their wandering." (p.181).

In the next section we present Tomer School and introduce its process of change and the accompanying research.

## **Tomer School**

Tomer Elementary School was established in 1972. The school consists of about 300 students in ten regular classes, organized by age, and three special-need (special education) classes, 55% boys and 45% girls. The student population comes from low socio-economic backgrounds, with about 13% of the students from immigrant families, in which Hebrew is not spoken. The faculty includes 27 teachers, about half of whom hold a M.Ed. degree. The parents are involved in decision-making in various domains within the school, such as in choosing after-school enrichment courses.

In 2013, Tomer School joined a network of schools in Beer Sheva, Israel that are based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This network is led by the Center for Motivation and Self-Determination at Kaye Academic College of Education. The network's goal is to promote self-determination and autonomous motivation in learning and teaching and to help schools develop into need-supportive environments (Bar-Tov & Kaplan, 2019). In 2015, the School joined the R&D, Initiatives and Experiments Division at the Israeli Ministry of Education.

In 2015, Tomer School launched an educational program aimed at promoting agentic engagement, an idea that is based on SDT and Reeve's ideas (Reeve, 2013) and the heutagogy learning-teaching approach (Hase & Kenyon, 2013; Blaschke, Kenyon, & Hase, 2014; Glassner & Back, 2020).

In 2018, the school introduced a unique induction model, aiming to create a need supportive school culture that supports beginning teachers during their initial years in the education system. The model, which is still in place, includes mechanisms for teacher induction such as matching new teachers with mentor teachers, assigning an induction coordinator, conducting workshop sessions for beginning teachers, encouraging initiatives by beginning teachers, and more.

The school was granted an Award of Excellence from the Ministry of Education for their unique model. In 2019, Tomer School was certified as an institution that promotes environmental education and sustainability for the community through multi-disciplinary and heutagogical-inspired learning.

Tomer School's vision focuses on advancing a need-supportive environment for both teachers and students, developing agentially engaged and autonomously motivated students and teachers, providing students with opportunities to successfully develop their motivational inner resources so that they are able to lead their own social life and achieve their goals. The school emphasizes partnerships among students and teachers, aimed at creating new knowledge.'

The implementation of these ideas in Tomer was accompanied by academic research. Some of its findings are presented in this chapter. The school's unique model has been presented in education and academic conferences (Bar-Tov & Kaplan, 2019; Bar-Tov & Kaplan, 2020).

## **Bridging between theory and practice**

### **The change process and the accompanying research**

The starting point of the change process at Tomer School was the staff's dissatisfaction with the children's motivational difficulties. Children had exhibited indifference, disinterest and minimized investment in their learning, being barely involved in decisions on learning or their social life in the school. Teachers had felt they had to lead and manage the students' learning and behavior (so that the teacher was at the center while the students were passive, leading to a controlling teaching style). However, the students' progress did not correlate with the teachers' investment.

Throughout the years, since 2015, the school continuously examined students' and teachers' needs and composed a school vision to answer these needs. To address the dissatisfaction with students' motivation issues, a special team was put together to lead the process, referred to as the 'leading team', which included the principal, vice principal, school counselor, grade representatives and other position holders in the school. The leading team worked collaboratively with the principal and the faculty. Staff-wide plenaries discussed ideas and decisions made by the leading team while also bringing up issues, ideas and needs of teachers, which were then discussed by the leading team. The theory-to-practice approach of the intervention program guided the discussions of both the leading team and the plenary meetings.

The school concentrated on processes that promoted active involvement and autonomous motivation of the learners. The processes were monitored by academic advisors from Kaye Academic College of Education and the R&D, Initiatives and Experiments Division of the Ministry of Education. During the years 2015-2020, the community of teachers convened every two weeks (for a total of 30 yearly hours), often in small groups, for professional development sessions in which the teachers were active participants. The topics covered in these sessions included SDT principles and ways to create a need-supportive school environment; Agentic Engagement and heutagogy theory and implementation; the principles of sustainability and their assimilation within the heutagogical process; and assimilating digital learning tools to support self-determined learning. The school also underwent physical transformation: vegetable gardens were planted in the school yard for students to nurture; study corners were added in the hallways outside the classrooms; and several classrooms were digitalized.

The faculty's theoretical learning gradually shifted into developing actual practices that are unique to the school, some of which are presented in this chapter. These teaching tools underwent constant adjustment and improvement until their final assimilation among the students and teachers.

### **Examples of tools developed within the school**

By adopting their unique pedagogical approach, teachers at Tomer School developed a wide range of methods to promote self-determined, agentic, and autonomously motivated students. Some of these tools are presented below.

***Method 1: Circles of Belonging – A heutagogical practice that supports students' psychological needs.*** Circles of Belonging is a spiral program taught throughout the school grades. Its central goal was to enhance the sense of belonging of students to their various social circles: the family, the class, the school, the neighborhood, the city and the state. The program started with the teacher introducing the central theme to the class. Then, applying heutagogical principles (e.g. exploring, creating, collaborating, connecting, sharing and reflecting; see Blaschke & Hase, 2016), the students chose their own specific topic and decided how they would study it and with whom (in teams, pairs, etc.). During the time allocated for the program, the students gathered at designated times to reflect, present their learning process, indicate its challenges, ask questions, share their experiences with the class, and receive feedback. The students then took part in their own evaluation by writing up a learning assessment scale together with their teachers.

When the learning culminated, each group presented its final self-learning product to the students and parents, and the final products were then also presented in a school exhibition.

The topics chosen by the students included the following: for the theme *My Neighbourhood, My City* students studied special sites within their neighborhood and city; for the theme *Israel Celebrates 70 Years of Independence*, students decided to study Israeli inventions, and the learned knowledge was presented by models and posters shown in an exhibition.

In accordance with the principles of SDT, i.e. specific ways to support students' psychological needs (see Kaplan & Assor, 2012 and Reeve, 2006), this heutagogical learning process supported the students' needs. Their need for autonomy was supported through the focus on personal fields of interest, allowing choice, and creating a real change relevant to the children's lives. Their need for competence was supported when teachers assisted them in setting optimal goals and dividing the learning process into steps for intermediate presentations, questions, and feedback. Students' need for relatedness was supported when students worked in teams of shared interests, received opportunities for self-expression within the team, and took on roles while working collaboratively. The students directed their own learning with the support of the teachers.

**Methods 2-3: The Matana Diary.** An important product created in the school is termed the *Matana* diary. *Matana* means 'gift' in Hebrew, and the *Matana* diary is a journey that promotes self-awareness, self-determination and agentic engagement (Bar-Tov, 2018). The diary has versions for younger and older students as well as for special needs students (The language and content were adjusted for the specific age group and population). The diary contains a variety of tools: dialogic tools, a SWOT chart (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats), self-inquiry (which is a personal learning map), a personal plan, an agency scale and a model of the agentic engagement of the student. Below are some of the components included in the diary that helped promote students' agentic engagement as reflected in a self-diagnostic process (their proactivity and ability to set goals, and more).

#### **Method 2: Actual Agentic Engagement – I lead my own change**

**Stage one: Knowing myself better, SWOT mapping and setting a goal.** The school implemented a unique version of the SWOT tool for students' self-diagnosis. This tool allowed the students to get to know their own strengths and opportunities, which may promote their success, as well as their weaknesses and external threats, which may hinder progress and should be handled in an agentic way. The self-diagnosis of each child was done together with the homeroom teacher. A variety of tools for teacher-student exchange developed by the school – such as empathic and need-supportive dialogue, which enables satisfaction of students' needs (e.g., to feel close to the teacher, to talk about authentic experiences and feelings, to receive specific feedback; see Kaplan & Assor, 2012) and competence-supporting dialogue (Assor, 2016) – assisted in this process. The statements included in the SWOT chart also helped the teacher when convening with the student (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Example of SWOT mapping and setting goals*

Weaknesses Areas in which I have to improve	Strengths Areas in which I have good abilities and can provide a springboard for my success
I feel that I am weak in...	I feel that I'm good at... I have strengths in...
I feel that it is difficult for me to...	I succeed in...
I don't succeed in...	I like... I like learning...
I am not good at...	In the class, I feel...

<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Strengths</b>
<b>Areas in which I have to improve</b>	<b>Areas in which I have good abilities and can provide a springboard for my success</b>
It is difficult for me to...	My best friend is...
A subject that is hard for me is...	A subject that is easy for me is ...
I want to improve in...	I'm good at learning...
A subject in which I don't succeed so much is ...	I feel it is easy for me to learn...
When I get to class in the morning, I am not happy with...	When I get to school/class in the morning I am glad that... to...
It bothers me that...	It makes me happy when...
With friends I feel...	With my friends, I feel...
	I feel that my behavior...

<b>Threats</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<b>Obstacles and disturbances that may negatively affect my development</b>	<b>Positive opportunities that may enable my success</b>
I am afraid of ...	I get academic assistance from...
I am afraid that I will not succeed in...	I participate in the ... committee. I am active in...
At home, I cannot...	I take active part in...
It is difficult for me that my parents...	My task at home is...
It is difficult for me that my friend...	My responsibility in class is...
In class, it bothers me that...	I was chosen to...
I would like the teacher to...	I integrate in...
I would like that...	I would like to speak with the teacher about... (afternoon classes, volunteer activity, duties, friends, fields of responsibility, family, teachers...)
I would like to speak with the teacher about...	Things that the teacher does that make me feel good...
(family, friends, teachers, learning)	Things in my class that make me learn willingly ...
Things the teacher does in class that bother me...	When something is difficult I ask ... for help.
Reasons why I don't want to learn in my class...	I help...

**Stage two: Setting self-improvement goals and a work plan.** Following the self-diagnosis, each student decided on one or more self-improvement goals in either the academic, behavioral, social, or the emotional areas. This stage was accompanied by a teacher, who helped the students to identify their strengths and utilize them to achieve their goal. Each student brainstormed what they could do to achieve their goal and who or what might help them, and then devised a plan that included operative, achievable objectives and a timetable. For example, a student whose learning capabilities were impeded by emotional regulation difficulties set a goal to improve her behavioral self-control. She decided on steps towards her goal, such as to take on a social role at the school. As a result of these steps, her behavior and consequently her academic performance improved.

**Stage three: Formative feedback and periodic meetings with the teacher.** During the timeframe set by the students for achieving their goals, they met with their teacher routinely in order to create a need-supporting dialogue. The teacher might, for example, give the child constructive feedback, convey messages about recruiting personal efforts and capacities, remind the student of his or her strengths, and brainstorm with them ways to overcome difficulties.

**Stage four: Summative feedback and presentation of the products.** At the end of the period set by the student for self-improvement, the students assessed their own success in achieving the goal (on a scale of *not at all*, *to some extent*, *to a large extent*). They also wrote a reflection, with the help of their teacher, to produce insights and set further goals. The students recorded this process in their Matana diary. Students could choose whether to present their products to the parents in a teacher-parent-child conference.

**Method 4: My Agency Probe.** This method is based on the definition of Agentic Engagement as the students' constructive contribution to the flow of the teaching process (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The Agency Probe allowed students to choose a learning activity from their classroom and examine it from their own point of view in various aspects, such as their level of interest and involvement, their level of self-expression and how much the activity was meaningful to them. This provided the teacher with valuable feedback and encouraged him or her to adjust the lesson so that it could better answer students' needs. For their part, students examined what *they* could do to improve their involvement and satisfy their own needs. This tool is presented below.

**Table 2**

*Example of Agency Probe*

The lesson/activity that I choose:

To a great extent	Very much	Some	A little	Not at all	
					To what extent was the activity interesting?
					To what extent did I feel involved?
					To what extent did I feel I could express myself?
					To what extent did I feel it was important to me?
					What do I choose to improve and how? What do I want my teacher to know?

## Findings: The perspectives of teachers and students

### Teachers' voices

In this case study, nine teachers and three members of the leading team were interviewed in semi-structured interviews that examined their views about the program goals, teachers' and students' agentic engagement and motivation, their personal experiences and the practices they used. The findings point to meaningful processes within the school (Bar-Tov and Kaplan, 2020; Bar-Tov & Kaplan, 2019; Kaplan & Madjar, 2019) and indicate that the difficulties experienced by teachers prior to the program have been addressed.

All teachers reported a slow and multifaceted change extending over several years that required, and still requires, an investment of time and effort to change their conceptions, to adapt new practices and to deal with uncertainty and difficulties. Examples of such difficulties include feeling unprepared before a lesson that was supposed to be led by students, or feeling uncertain when a student runs a lesson, which might develop in unexpected directions. They reported changes in their own beliefs and teaching methods. Traditional learning has shifted towards learning based on active involvement, choice, and students' self-determination and agency. There has been a change from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Teachers gradually learned to allow the students more independence and to let go of their need to control (the students, the lesson).

All the teachers expressed intrinsic goals and beliefs concerning the students, which reflected the changes they had undergone. They would like to see a student who is curious, proactive and involved in his academic and social life: a student who sets goals and strives to achieve them, *'an active, agentic student who takes his destiny into his own hands and leads his own life'* (interviewee 8).

While initially, teachers thought that meaningful learning would only occur if they transfer the knowledge themselves, believing that only an authoritative teaching style might bring about a change, they now realize that the key is in granting autonomy to the students and letting them lead their own learning.

Furthermore, the school has formulated a uniform language of professional terms while developing and implementing practical tools to put its educational approach into practice. The following statements demonstrate the transformation experienced by the teachers as they developed an orientation towards and practices of student-centered teaching:

*'Amazing. They have independence, they have autonomy and they have their ambitions and their goals. It's wonderful. It's great to see that... It wasn't easy, knowing how much to let go and granting them independence.'* (interviewee 1).

*'Within a few years I learned to let go. What do I mean by 'let go'? Knowing that the child, the student, has capabilities that haven't been given an opportunity to shine because we, the teachers, have held – what's the expression? – held the cards close to our chests, and didn't trust our students.'* (interviewee 6).

These changes occurred in an environment that supported the psychological needs of the teachers, too. The need for student autonomy, for example, was supported when the program (and the principal) enabled teachers to realize their capacities, express their ideas, and share difficulties in a supportive atmosphere. We can also see support in teachers' competence. Teachers' initiatives were encouraged and it became legitimate to bring up difficulties and dilemmas without feeling threatened or judged.

## Students' voices

The school counsellor interviewed 13 children in grades 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> through semi-structured interviews that focused on their learning experiences, motivation, views on the school's learning-teaching methods and their social life (Kaplan & Madjar, 2019).

Students spoke about the opportunity to experience new things, express their own interests, fulfill their dreams, discover their own abilities and work both independently and collaboratively with classmates. These experiences resulted in the creation of new knowledge, bringing about creativity and curiosity-led involvement (autonomous motivation):

*'They let me open up my mind, be creative, try new things, things I would like to see exist... these are new things, different and special things.'* (interviewee 8).

*'I thought what I would do if I wanted to change anything about today's technology, improve something in the world. I had an idea and we managed to do... ah... many things, we also had a kind of invention fair for Israeli inventions, and each one exactly according to his dream or his opinion and what he knows, he succeeded... I saw in myself things I didn't even know I could do.'* (interviewee 5).



Responses indicated a proactive approach to learning and to social life. The students described opportunities where they were provided to express their needs and preferences and to lead their own learning and social life. For example:

*Interviewer: what makes you satisfied?*

*Interviewee: that we can express ourselves.*

*Interviewer: how?*

*Interviewee: that we can invent something we want, not that they (the teachers) want, that we want.*

*Interviewer: and how does that affect your drive to learn?*

*Interviewee: better, because they let us express ourselves. (Interviewee 14)*

Students exhibited triple-loop reflection when they reported what they had learned about themselves as students and human beings:

*I learned about myself that when I set goals for myself I achieve them... I have nothing to fear... (Interviewee 9).*

*I learned that I know what I want and I stand up for my views... (Interviewee 9).*

*I do things my own way and nobody else's way... (Interviewee 14).*

While teachers' interviews emphasized pedagogical aspects, students highlighted the social aspect, focusing on the need for belongingness to their peers and on various ways of achieving this goal (e.g. group learning, setting social goals):

*'I am a girl who likes to help and support friends, as much as I can... to help friends and contribute to the school, and I can do that in the school.' (Interviewee 10).*

Children expressed a sense of autonomy, choice and motivation. Their reports indicate a variety of ways that teachers supported their autonomy.

*'The teacher lets us be very free, think about all kinds of things we would like to do... a sense of 'you do what you want and if you make mistakes it's okay, mistakes happen'... to feel that what we do is in our hands and in no one else's hands and that kind of thing... (Interviewee 11).*

*'You learn about the thing you feel most connected to in the world, the thing you love the most, how could you not want to study it? (Interviewee 14).*

The *Matana* diary promoted students' awareness of their feelings, opinions, and preferences. It enhanced their sense of competence and trust in their abilities, allowing them to discover inner strengths and solve social problems.

*Interviewer: How important is it to you, how helpful is it to choose your goal in your diary?*

*It helps me understand what I need help with, what I like, what I'm strong at academically, what I enjoy doing, and then I plan how to achieve my goal (interviewee 11).*

Children also expressed feelings of belongingness to the school, to their peers and to their teachers. Working in groups also enhanced social relationships. The students consulted with their teachers, and these dialogues made them feel that there was a caring and dependable figure that could help them cope with difficulties.

*'Being a student at Tomer is really fun because they always listen to you, always give you an opportunity to express your feelings and do things that will benefit you and other students... a child who comes to school has a great opportunity to succeed and meet new friends.' (interviewee 5).*



## Conclusion

The process of change at Tomer Elementary School was spiral and continuous, and ranged over the entire school community. It was a gradual change through a continued, consistent process in an environment that supported the needs of both teachers and students. This endeavor is not without hurdles but it allows teachers to meet the challenges, continue to construct their pedagogical worldview and build the appropriate methods to fulfill their dreams regarding learning and teaching.

We can conclude that schools should strive to be need-supportive environments that enable agentic realization of students' capabilities and interests. Teachers should understand SDT principles and heutagogy practice by experiencing them. It is most important to trust the teachers' capabilities to learn as a model that encourages them to trust their pupils' abilities. This can be done by supporting the teachers' psychological needs. The trust given to them modeled a parallel process with the students.

The teachers attested that they had shifted from teacher-centered education to a student-centered approach.

The qualitative study (Kaplan & Madjar, 2019) exposes the connection between theory and practice. In order to develop autonomous motivation and to be agentic, students need to trust their teachers and classmates and to feel trusted by them (i.e., they need to feel a sense of relatedness). They also need to feel capable of being self-determined and active learners and self-aware about who they are as learners, what they want and what their needs are (a sense of competence and autonomy),

Heutagogy practice allows learners to lead themselves in an agentic way. Yet we have learned that it is important to scaffold the process. Both teachers and students need assistance as they adjust to the new approach. This understanding is behind the development of specific tools at the school, which provided scaffolding for teachers so that they could practice and apply ways to support their students' psychological needs and encourage heutagogical teaching and learning.

The role of the school principal in this untraditional process is to be a role model supporting teachers' autonomy and encouraging teachers' and students' initiatives as part of a school culture. We conclude this report with the principal's testimony as given in the interview:

We are excited to see the shine in the students' eyes and their joy of learning. The children are very active and their voices are heard much beyond the lessons. The children lead projects of their own initiatives when they identify a need; they write to me as their principal quite a lot of letters ..., they convene with me and conduct open dialogue and start acting. We want our children, the citizens of tomorrow, to be active participants and to act for themselves and their communities, and these children are actually out there doing it.

As this manuscript is being written, Tomer School is conducting remote learning due to the COVID19 pandemic. The learning methods at this unusual time include a heutagogical learning setup in which the students manage their own school day at least once every week. They choose their own study topics and decide how to represent the new knowledge and how to assess the process and its products.

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