Student Engagement in School Life and Learning

contents

foreword

This is a major study on student engagement in Sixth Forms and Junior College in Malta. It is an original and unique study that sheds important light on the complicated reality of student engagement. Student engagement of its very nature is an elusive and complex notion. There are diverse and competing understandings of it. This study takes an inclusive perspective of engagement since it focuses on academic and non-academic aspects in school life and learning. In other words, it takes a holistic perspective of engagement. It also acknowledges that education of its very nature is political in nature, which is it intrinsically involves power relations among different actors involved in the process of education. A meaningful and worthwhile student engagement is one that is built on a positive and empowering relationship with the educators, the institutions, and society at large.

The study takes its impetus from the fact that, as indicated in a 2012 NCFHE survey, while the participation in Further and Higher Education at age 17 has increased from 59% to 83%, the participation at age 19 continues to remain at 56%. Malta is aiming to reach the EU targets by 2020. To assist in this process of improvement, this study sought to collect data about students in sixth forms and junior college engagement and disengagement from the perspective of school administrators, teachers, and students themselves. It also aims to examine the connection between student engagement or lack thereof and the students' decision to pursue or not pursue further studies beyond Sixth Form and Junior College. Inclusion in Diversity, the motto for Malta's EU Presidency in Education, requires, among other things, that we listen to and seriously consider the voices of students. Taking students voice seriously does not mean that we have to romanticize whatever students tell us. And this is why the study also sought the perspective of school administrators and teachers. Time and financial limitations hindered the study to also seek the views of parents and the community at large.

From this study it emerges that there are indeed some differences regarding the views of teaching expressed by students and teachers. Students offer several examples of how teachers can improve their teaching in order to engage the students more. However, teachers also felt that they are limited in

what they can do because of syllabi that are too taxing, large class sizes, guidelines from administrators, and the excessive emphasis on examinations. There is no doubt that the content of what is taught in sixth forms and junior college needs serious revising to make them more relevant. This is not a matter of lowering standards; it is a matter of diversifying the content to reach more students and to fulfill more needs. The one size fits all mentality, if not changed, will continue to hinder more students from pursuing further and higher education.

Equally important is the need to consider diversifying the modes of assessment at this level. A democratic country cannot rely on memorization and narrow forms of examinations to determine educational success. The "examination culture" hinders both students and educators to be fully engaged in a meaningful and holistic educational journey. We cannot continue to kill genuine interest and participation from a young age and then almost magically expect students to continue further and higher education. If we continue to reproduce the current system and ethos, it will be no surprise that students after finishing sixth form or junior college will continue to prefer to seek employment especially if they consider further and higher education a replica of an irrelevant curriculum as experienced in sixth form or junior college. In this regard it is worthwhile considering extending the time of sixth form and junior college to give more time for meaningful engagement, as well as consider introducing a credit system that is based not solely on examinations and hence capture the different learning styles and needs of students.

The suggested changes and other identified in the report will help us be in a better position to achieve the four pillars identified by UNESCO for a 21st century education: Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. Jacques Delores, former President of the European Commission recently concluded that "lifelong learning is essential for gaining self-esteem and the ability to take control of one's own life." A meaningful education in the 21st century has to focus on all aspects of life. In a recent keynote address at a conference in Malta on School Leadership and Equity, Mrs. Reicherts, the Director General of Schools in the EU, warned that a meaningful education has to bring back passion for learning and for life. A mechanical educational system geared for examinations, and controlled by an impoverished notion of learning identified with memorizing and regurgitation will not help our future citizens to pursue further and higher education and develop their critical and democratic qualities.

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executive summary

The following research project has been carried out in light of Malta's commitment to reach the European Union's targets within the EU 2020 strategy, namely to increase the percentage of 30-34 year olds having successfully completed higher education to 40% and decrease early school leaving among 18-24 year olds to 10%. In the last years, Malta has been investing heavily in its education and training system and despite significant progress, the early school leaving rate remains among the highest in the European Union. In order to better understand and analyze the situation, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education has embarked on a study which reflects on student engagement and participation in their learning and school life. By collecting data through an online survey and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain the views of administrators, teachers and former students of public and private Sixth Forms, covering the majority of student enrollment in further education in Malta.

A number of main themes has emanated from views expressed by the three groups of respondents, through the interviews and the online survey. Comparing and analyzing these recurrent topics have led to a number of recommendations presented in the last chapter of this report. The following is a brief overview of the salient points extracted from the study.

The purpose of education as identified by the three groups of participants in this study, is to equip students with a set of skills and competences to prepare them for their future lives in the workplace or in further education.

Teachers, students and administrators **understand and define student engagement** as the behaviours exhibited by students such as compliance, willingness and motivation to participate in the learning process. Both the cognitive and the emotional perspective were taken into consideration in defining student engagement.

The forms of student engagement include the learners' active participation in the classroom, in extracurricular activities, and in non-academic programs. The academic aspect however was believed to be of primary importance. **Students' engagement has several benefits** as it makes learning a more enjoyable experience, fosters student commitment, increases retention and positively impacts learners' futures as active citizens.

Students discussed **the roles and characteristics of good teachers** whereby a set of personality traits, teaching methods, and class management styles have been identified. In brief, good teachers were portrayed as confident and passionate experts who set high expectations by challenging, reinforcing, and encouraging their students.

This study has also focused on identifying **the reasons behind engagement and disengagement.** First, the school environment, in terms of positive attitude, physical resources, timetables and breaks, and pedagogical practices, were found to affect student engagement. Second, students' socio-emotional wellbeing was found to play a major role as well. This included their feeling of belonging to their institution through the bonds built with peers and superiors. A number of other student dependent factors were also identified. Students were more engaged when they were encouraged to take charge of their learning, rather than being 'spoon-fed' and when they were encouraged to voice their opinion. The students' family background, including their economic and social standing, can also deeply affect their learning experience. Students' interest in their subject choices was identified as an important factor

as well especially when parental pressure and lack of information frequently leads students into wrong subject choices. The teaching and learning process and assessment methods can detrimentally affect student engagement. Respondents encouraged the adoption of alternative modes of teaching and assessment to take into account individual idiosyncrasies and allow students with different capabilities to reveal their full potential. An engaging learning process pushes students past mere memorization and makes them aware of the rationale and applicability of what they are learning. A rigid and heavy syllabus was mentioned at several instances as a major obstacle for student engagement. A healthy balance of academia and extracurricular engagement was equally identified as key to a successful Sixth Form experience due to the numerous benefits of extracurricular activities to students.

As a conclusion to these findings, several recommendations have been put forward.

- An educational system that responds to students' needs can empower students and ultimately lead to engaged learners.
- Training students to become independent and responsible lifelong learners starts from early school years through a student centered approach and active learning.
- Students become more committed to their learning when they are convinced of the relevance of their studies to their real life and to their long term plans.
- Involving teachers in designing the syllabi and in developing school policies enhances the teaching and learning processes and makes the latter more responsive to the needs of all those involved.
- Continuous professional development supports teachers in incorporating student engagement in their teaching styles.
- Adequate career guidance plays a major role in raising awareness among students as to the different paths available after secondary schooling and can assist them in making correct subject choices.
- Delaying any important career decision or definite subject choices to a later stage in a students' schooling can help decrease stress on the learners and give them more flexibility for self discovery.
- When administrators and teachers adopt open door policies, they become physically and emotionally more accessible for students, hence improving the students' general well being at school.
- Teachers persistently highlight the demanding rigid syllabus and time limitations as the main reasons that prevent them from developing engaging lessons. A revised curriculum reduces stress on both teacher and learner and gives teachers more flexibility to personalize their teaching and engage their students.
- Alternative forms of assessment that are not exclusively dependent on a summative and high-stakes examinations, as well as introducing credit system programmes in Sixth Forms can create further possibilities for students to personalize their learning experience.

authors' note

It is with great pleasure that we make public this substantial research study through which we dig deeper into students' engagement in their learning. Driven by our concern about the high decrease in participation in education between age 17 and age 19, and motivated by Malta's commitment to reduce the share of Early School Leavers to 10% by 2020, the Research and Policy Recommendation Unit at NCFHE had embarked in this project towards the end of 2014. We started out with an online survey to quantitatively capture students' engagement in their school life from the perspective of students, teachers and administrative staff in Sixth Forms in Malta. The survey was followed up by a total of 105 face-to-face interviews with those three main groups in an attempt to obtain deeper insights into the dynamics of student engagement.

The enthusiasm and high responses we met from the participants was a clear indication that there is a general commitment to a high quality education in Malta. For that, we deeply thank each and every person who dedicated time and energy to answer our questions whether through the online survey or during the interviews. Our thanks are due as well to the Heads of Sixth Forms who supported this project through facilitating our contact with their students and staff members. We also thank the research analysts and research assistants whose dedication to the project helped form a strong qualified team of researchers collecting, analysing, and presenting the extensive findings.

Our duty, following the publication of this report, is to disseminate the findings as widely as necessary to raise awareness among the broader general public regarding aspects of student engagement in their school life and learning, particularly in relation to the needs of students and staff members for a more positive and sustainable teaching and learning experience.

Research and Policy Recommendation Unit
National Commission for Further and Higher Education

chapter 1
introduction

1.1. Rationale behind this research

Malta is investing heavily in its education and training system but despite significant progress, the early school leaving rate remains the second highest in the European Union. Malta's National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) conducts and disseminates research and policy analysis to encourage policy-makers, educators and the public to improve educational opportunities and outcomes. A 2012 NCFHE survey indicates that participation in Further and Higher education at age 17 has consistently increased from 59% in 2008 to 83% in 2012. In comparison, participation at age 19 continues to remain low at 56% in 2012, with a mere one percent increase from 2008. In order to better understand and analyze the significant difference in participation of individuals between the ages of 17 and 19, it is imperative to reflect on student engagement and participation from the point of view of administrators, teachers, and students. This is particularly true for Sixth Forms for they reflect the majority of student enrollment in Further Education.

The current review is carried out in light of Malta's commitment to reach the European Union's targets within the EU 2020 strategy, namely to increase the percentage of 30-34 year olds having successfully completed Higher education to 40% and decrease early school leaving among 18-24 year olds to 10% (European Commission 2014: 9). The National Reform Programme for Malta has confirmed its plans to reduce the share of Early School Leavers to 10% by 2020 but has set more cautiously optimistic goals for the Higher education cohort at 33% (Ministry of Finance 2014: 25).

The importance of student engagement for learning and scholastic achievement makes it all the more important to dissect the reasons behind student disengagement by analyzing a number of factors including learners' attitude towards school life and learning as well as the overall quality of education. Enhancing student engagement is a complex process that promotes an environment in which students are the owners of their own learning, which in turn may encourage them to continue studying beyond Further Education. To this end, the objectives of the current research can be classified in the following manner:

✓	✓	✓	✓
different forms and purposes of student engagement;	views toward student engagement held by administrators, teachers, and former students;	conditions enhancing or hindering student engagement;	the relationship between student engagement, students' academic achievement and prospects for further studies.

1.2. Methodology

The following section provides an overview of the methodology applied, including the target population of this research, the methods of data collection, the data collection phase, methods of data analysis and ethical considerations underlying this research.

Target population

Since student engagement is dependent on not only students, but also other actors, the target population of this research includes former students, teachers and the administrative staff of public and private Sixth Forms in Malta and Gozo. Public Sixth Forms participating in this research include:
- Gian Frangisk Abela Junior College
- Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School
- Sir M.A. Refalo Sixth Form

Private Sixth Forms participating in this research include:
- St. Aloysius College Sixth Form
- De La Salle College Sixth Form
- St. Martin's College Sixth Form
- Verdala International School

Participants in the current research include former students who completed Sixth Form during the scholastic years 2012/2013 and 2013/2014. The participants are comprised of students who completed Sixth Form successfully as well as those who dropped out. To this end, the research seeks to explore the link between student engagement and learners' decision to continue their education following the completion of Sixth Form. The participants required to reflect on their experience in the current study are former students who completed Sixth Form within the past two years. It is important to point out that the different contexts these students have been exposed to since their graduation from Sixth Form and their experience in other educational institutions may have influenced their perception.

This research project also addresses student engagement from the perspective of Sixth Form teachers and administrators. The teaching staff partaking in the current study worked in public and private Sixth Forms during the scholastic year 2014/2015. The administrative staff worked in Sixth Form administration, including heads of school, deputy heads, assistant heads, registrars, or heads of department. Considering that a number of the participants interviewed as administrative staff also worked as Sixth Form teachers, the feedback received from these individuals may have been influenced by their teaching and administrative experiences.
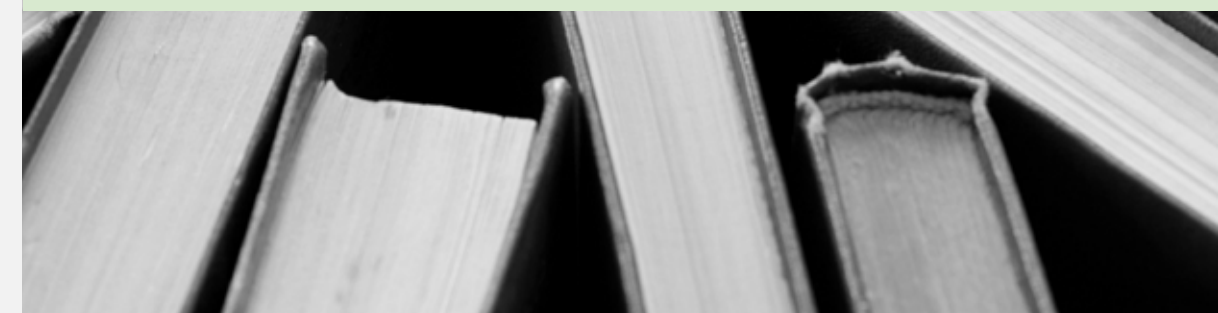
Method of data collection

Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study uses 1) survey and 2) in-depth, semi-structured interviews to obtain the views of administrators, teachers and former students. In the quantitative approach using survey, the aim is to gain an overview of the administrators, teachers and former students' perception of engagement. The findings from the survey allowed for a revision and refinement of the interview questions used in the qualitative phase of the study. The survey obtained voluntary informed consent from former students and teacher participants willing to take part in in-depth interviews. In view of the limited number of administrators at Sixth Forms, the institutions involved in this study were asked to introduce administrators willing to participate in semi-structured interviews. Pilot studies were carried out to ensure that the research instruments employed for the data collection in step 1 and step 2 were appropriate both for the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study.

Data collection phase

Data collection for the online survey (Step 1) commenced in April 2015 and concluded in October 2015. A total of 817 former students from public and private Sixth Forms in Malta and Gozo participated in the survey. Some of the responses were eliminated due to lack of clarity and incomplete information leaving 516 responses for the final analysis. The participants were required to provide information on their age, gender, the year they left Sixth Form, the name of the Sixth Form attended, in addition to feedback on at least one other question. Data collected by the NCFHE through the annual Further and Higher education statistics survey put the total number of students enrolled in the second year of Sixth Form in the academic year 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 at 4,904. This guarantees a 3.89% margin of error assuming a 95% degree of confidence, making it satisfactory.

Furthermore, a total of 174 teachers from public and private Sixth Forms in Malta and Gozo participated in the survey. In the feedback that was accepted, teachers were required to respond to a minimum number of questions including age, gender, the respondents' affiliated institutions, the extent of teaching experience along with feedback on at least one other question. As a result, 147 responses could be considered for analysis. Based on the information provided by the participating public and private Sixth Forms, the total number of teachers at Sixth Form is about 585, this guarantees a 7% margin of error assuming a 95% degree of confidence.

Overall, 31 responses were received from the administrative staff at public and private Sixth Forms in Malta and Gozo. Based on the information provided by the participating public and private Sixth Forms, in the academic year 2014/2015, a total of 50 individuals were employed in administrative positions in Malta and Gozo. In view of the limited number of administrative staff at Sixth Forms, the number of responses collected guarantees a margin of error of only 10.9% assuming a 95% degree of confidence, which is unsatisfactory. Presenting findings on a limited target population may impinge on the anonymity of the participants. Due to ethical considerations, these findings were not presented in the report, but were used to inform the analysis of the qualitative data. The semi-structured interviews as part of the qualitative approach (Step 2) were carried out between April 2015 and July 2015. During this period a total of 105 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted; 46 of which were with students, 43 with teachers and 16 with the administrative staff.

Ethical considerations

Before initiating the research project, formal approval was sought from the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Education and Employment. This allowed researchers access to contact details of prospective participants from Sixth Forms in Malta and Gozo. In the online survey, respondents were informed about the aims and objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses in order to help them make an informed decision on whether or not to participate in the study. The participants who were informed of the voluntary nature of the interview expressed their willingness to participate by providing us with basic contact information in order to arrange the interview. Before the interview was conducted, the interviewees were informed that all the information disclosed during the interview will be treated confidentially and anonymously by the researchers carrying out the analysis. To maintain anonymity, a code was assigned to every interview conducted, which was then allocated to the corresponding audio file and transcript. To further cement the anonymity of the participants, no reference is made to names of institutions which have been categorized as public Sixth Forms and private Sixth Forms, including both church-based and independent schools.

1.3. Structure of the report

Chapter 1 outlines the rationale behind the research conducted as well as the methodology applied in obtaining and presenting the data in this report.

Chapter 2 consists of the literature review. This chapters aims to provide a theoretical background to various aspects of student engagement in this report.

Chapter 3 presents the findings from the quantitative data collected in the online survey of former students, teachers and administrative staff. The remaining chapters provide an overview, comparison and analysis of the findings obtained from the qualitative part of this research regarding different aspects of student engagement as perceived by former students, teachers and administrators.
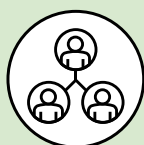
Chapter 4 provides an overview regarding the concept of student engagement as perceived by former students, teachers and administrators. It includes the definitions of student engagement, its forms, importance, and signs as perceived by the three groups of people interviewed.

Chapter 5 presents, compares, and analyzes the roles and responsibilities regarding facilitating student engagement held by former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 6 focuses on the conditions contributing to student engagement from the perspective of former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 7 points to the conditions hindering student engagement from the perspective of the three target groups.

Chapter 8 looks at the relationship between student engagement and continuation of studies from the perspective of former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 9 provides a comprehensive discussion of the key findings of each chapter along with comparisons between views expressed by students, teachers and administrative staff.

Chapter 10 offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of engagement as seen through the eyes of students, teachers and administrators. The final chapter is devoted to a discussion on the extent to which the generated topics from the survey and interviews can offer possibilities for engagement in the Maltese educational context.

chapter 2
literature review

It has been more than seven decades since scholars, educators and researchers began using the term student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2010). For the majority of this time, student engagement was considered as synonymous with student success in attaining learning goals. The 21st century, however, saw research on student engagement embody a complex and multidimensional construct (Reschly & Christenson, 2012) that embodied sociological, critical, pedagogic, cultural, organizational and economic perspectives (Kuh et al., 2006). The concept of student engagement in learning spaces captured the imagination of researchers as they focused on a variety of narratives on how to improve engagement by focusing on student agency and motivation (Schuetz, 2008); environmental factors including socioeconomic backgrounds (Law, 2005); impact of teacher praxis and teacher relations with students (Umback & Wawrzynski, 2005); the role of the institution (Kuh, 2009); and sociopolitical and critical democratic paradigms (McMahon & Portelli, 2004).

According to Kahu (2013), these narratives have been classified into four distinct categories consisting of the behavioural perspective, the psychological aspect, the socio-cultural narrative, and the holistic perspective (Kahu, 2013). The behavioral perspective explores the link between effective teaching practices and student behavior. However, a lack of emphasis on student emotions led to the psychological perspective which explores the affective dimensions impacting student engagement (Askham, 2008) including the feeling of belonging on the part of students (Libbey, 2004). The socio-cultural perspective examines the extent to which contextual factors such as disciplinary power, academic culture and an excessive focus on performativity impact student learning and engagement (Mann, 2001). In the holistic perspective, Bryson and Hand (2007) highlight three levels of engagement, namely discourse with students, enthusiasm for the subject, and professionalism regarding the teaching process. In the holistic paradigm, Zepke, Leach and Butler (2010) have identified different research perspectives related to student engagement including motivation, transactional engagement with teachers and students, institutional and non-institutional support and active citizenship. Over the years, the multifaceted phenomenon of student engagement has turned into an effective school-based intervention used to endorse school completion and prevent early dropout (Appleton et al., 2008). It has also underlined the need to address student disengagement and the decline in academic motivation (Elmore & Huebner, 2010).

Finn and Zimmer (2012) assert that student engagement is theoretically distinct from student motivation. In this respect, engagement is believed to represent the affective, cognitive, and behavioral activation of students' motivation and energy (Assor, 2012). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) define engagement as energy in action which creates a space where engagement is studied within the context of academic engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012) and classroom engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Meanwhile, Zyngier (2007) affirms that a pedagogy that links the students' lived experiences to their learning experiences can lead to authentic student engagement, particularly for at-risk and marginalized students. Harper and Quaye (2009) describe student engagement as "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes" (p. 2).

There are a number of factors including historical, economic, theoretical and practical behind the increasing interest in student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). While Fredricks et al. (2004) introduced engagement indicators such as behavioral, emotional and cognitive factors, McMahon and Portelli (2004) emphasize that student engagement needs to include civic and social action dimensions and raise concerns over the operational nature of engagement research. In this vein, McMahon and Portelli (2004) advance a culture where engagement is dialogic and learners are urged to embrace the critical and democratic dimension of engagement and encouraged to become active citizens. Barnett and Coate (2005) took this a step further and distinguished between operational and ontological engagement. According to Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2014), ontological commitment entails the student's willingness to be committed to the learning process in an effort to expand the boundaries of the curriculum by critically engaging with it. In this vein, Smyth (2012) maintains that students' search for social justice might require them to talk back to a system that perpetuates injustice and reproduces the status quo. According to Smyth (2012), students should react to a lack of respect for the beliefs and practices of the marginalized as well as depleted credentials that force them to take undervalued courses and end up with mediocre jobs.

Research indicates that engagement can increase 'student success' (Thomas, 2012), enhance performance by enriching the experiences of the learners and educators (Kuh et at., 2011; Streeting & Wise, 2009), and advance the curricula in a fashion that is conducive to effective teaching and learning (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). In this milieu, Zepke (2014) criticizes the generic 'one-size-fits-all' approach that can be found in the majority of the research on student engagement. Such an approach that concedes to the demands of the neoliberal discourse has a tendency to disregard critical equity differences including race, gender and class under the label of diversity (Giddens, 2001). Zepke (2014) has expressed concern over the fact that such an outlook has the ability to disregard cultural, socio-economic and emotive diversity. This poses a much broader problem of the neoliberal impact on the research on engagement. According to Zepke (2014), the neoliberal gaze on engagement research has narrowed it considerably by compelling researchers to concentrate on knowledge capitalism, performativity and accountability.
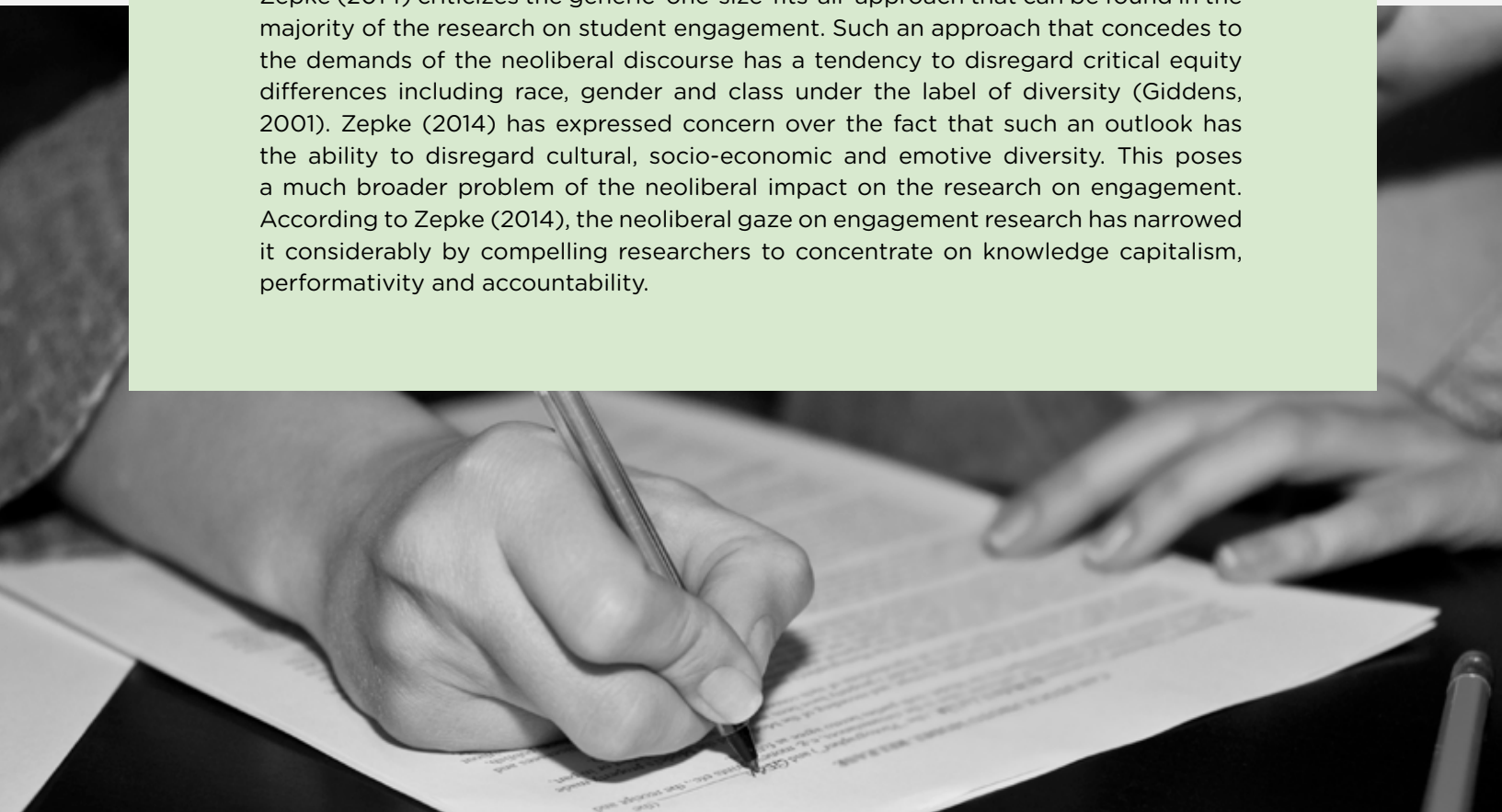
The kind of instrumental knowledge advanced by the neoliberal orthodoxy aims to construct generic behaviors and competencies (Clarke, 2012). Lawson and Lawson (2013) warn of the impact of such an instrumentalist perspective on student engagement which can lead to inorganic and generic forms of student engagement. For instance, engaged learners are more likely to meet the demands of the neoliberal model in completing courses and preparing for the job market as opposed to students who are considered to be disengaged (McCormick et al., 2013). Zepke (2015) points out that, "it becomes very important to know how well students engage and what educational practices nurture such engagement. An industry has developed around measuring generic indicators of engaging practices and behaviours" (p. 705). It is at this juncture that educators and policymakers can view engagement as something that must be negotiated (McInnis, 2003).

Another major concern that arises from mainstream literature on student engagement is the emphasis on procedures or strategies that claim to increase engagement irrespective of contexts and conditions. There is no doubt that educators agree that engagement is better than disengagement. But such a common belief does not eliminate the fact that different forms of engagement exist depending on the differences in aims and objectives of the students. The central questions that need to be asked more often are: engagement for what? For whom? As McMahon, Portelli, and Vibert have argued, there are three major replies to the question about the aim of student engagement. The most common perspective holds that student engagement should aim at making students pass tests and make sure they have learnt (which in practice amounts to memorizing) the curriculum. This perspective rarely questions the value of exams and hardly ever casts doubt on the relevance of the curriculum. Student engagement is identified as learners engaging in academic matters with the intent of passing exams.
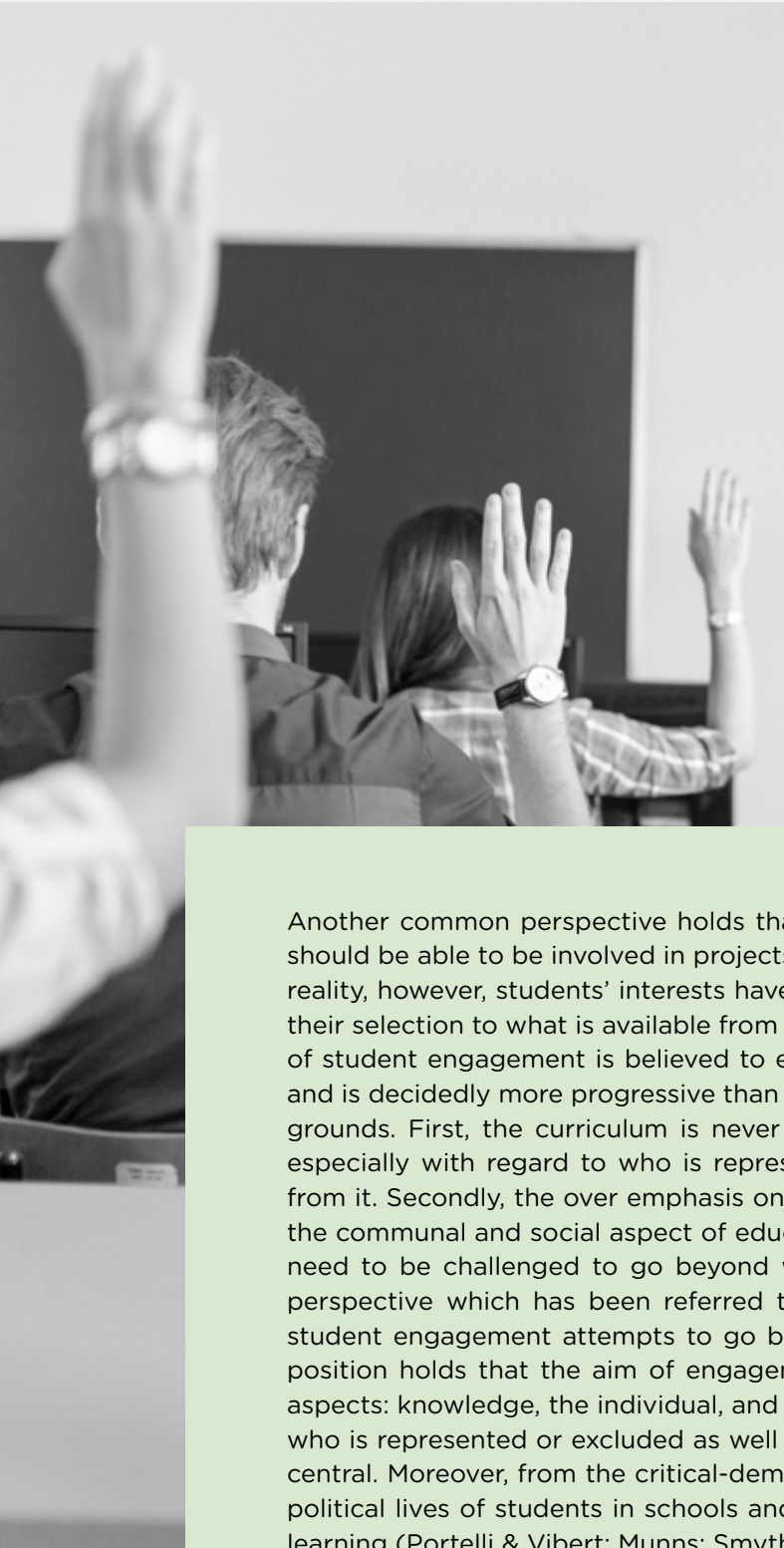
Another common perspective holds that student engagement means that students should be able to be involved in projects and activities that are of interest to them.

Another common perspective holds that student engagement means that students should be able to be involved in projects and activities that are of interest to them. In reality, however, students' interests have to be geared towards a direction that limits their selection to what is available from the mandated curriculum. Although this form of student engagement is believed to enhance the personal growth of the students and is decidedly more progressive than the previous model, it is still criticized on two grounds. First, the curriculum is never questioned for its relevance or importance, especially with regard to who is represented in the curriculum or who is excluded from it. Secondly, the over emphasis on the individual can lead to the overlooking of the communal and social aspect of education. What is essential here is that students need to be challenged to go beyond what they seem to be interested in. A third perspective which has been referred to as the critical democratic perspective on student engagement attempts to go beyond the two above-mentioned views. This position holds that the aim of engagement should combine three equally valuable aspects: knowledge, the individual, and the community. In each case, concerns about who is represented or excluded as well as who is privileged or marginalized become central. Moreover, from the critical-democratic perspective, the individual, social and political lives of students in schools and the larger community become the focus of learning (Portelli & Vibert; Munns; Smyth; Zynger).

chapter 3
quantitative research

key findings

Teachers and students' perception of different aspects of Sixth Form

- Teachers at private Sixth Forms, female teachers and teachers with fewer years of work experience are more aware of the importance of student engagement and different methods of engaging students.
- Former students appear to have a strong desire for independence, claiming to have enjoyed and worked hard in Sixth Form.

Meaning and benefits of student engagement

- Teachers generally associate student engagement with active participation in class.
- The main benefit of student engagement, according to teachers, is that it facilitates learning, while disengagement hinders students' personal development, wellbeing, and learning.

Conditions contributing to or hindering student engagement

- According to teachers, the main factor contributing to student engagement is good teachers who deliver lessons drawing on an enjoyable and inclusive pedagogy and who have a strong and healthy relationship with the students.

Perception of the usefulness of teachers and teaching methods

- Former students generally considered teachers as quite helpful. For them, a good teacher draws on suitable teaching techniques to effectively cover the syllabus. Moreover, the importance of teachers being a source of support and counseling has also been highlighted.
- Former students found teachers' presentations and explanations, hands-on activities, class discussions, and school activities outside academic work as imperative to their engagement. This corresponds with teachers' responses who generally draw on explanations and presentations during lessons apart from asking questions.
- The least tolerated teaching methods include student presentations and group work which are also found to be considered as least helpful by former students.

Forms of encouraging student engagement and their impact

- Teachers generally engage students in class by asking questions and encouraging discussions. An open and supportive attitude towards students also encourages engagement.
- These perceptions contribute to improved learning outcomes both in terms of performance and retention, making learning more interesting and instilling motivation and confidence in students.

Reasons for students to not continue their education

- Teachers identified the main reasons for students' decision to not pursue further or higher education. These include disengagement from the education system, academic ability, learning style, and financial considerations such as the need or desire to start earning money.

As part of the research on student engagement, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education carried out an online survey among students, teachers and administrators in order to gather information on the factors influencing student engagement in Sixth Forms. The key findings from these surveys are presented in this chapter. In view of the limited number of individuals in administration positions in Sixth Forms across Malta and Gozo and the consequent narrow pool of administrative participants, findings from the responses by these individuals are not presented in this chapter in order to preserve their anonymity.

3.1. Feedback from students

Students' current status

Figure 1 indicates that out of a total of 441 respondents providing information on their current status, the vast majority are enrolled in Further and Higher education. Most respondents indicate that they are attending university (61.9%). This percentage is considerably higher among former students of private Sixth Forms. A significant proportion of respondents also indicated that they are still attending Sixth Forms, especially public Sixth Forms, which may be linked to repeaters. It is also interesting to note that a number of the respondents were either full-time or part-time employees or seeking employment. Respondents who attended public Sixth Forms were more likely to be employed or seek employment.
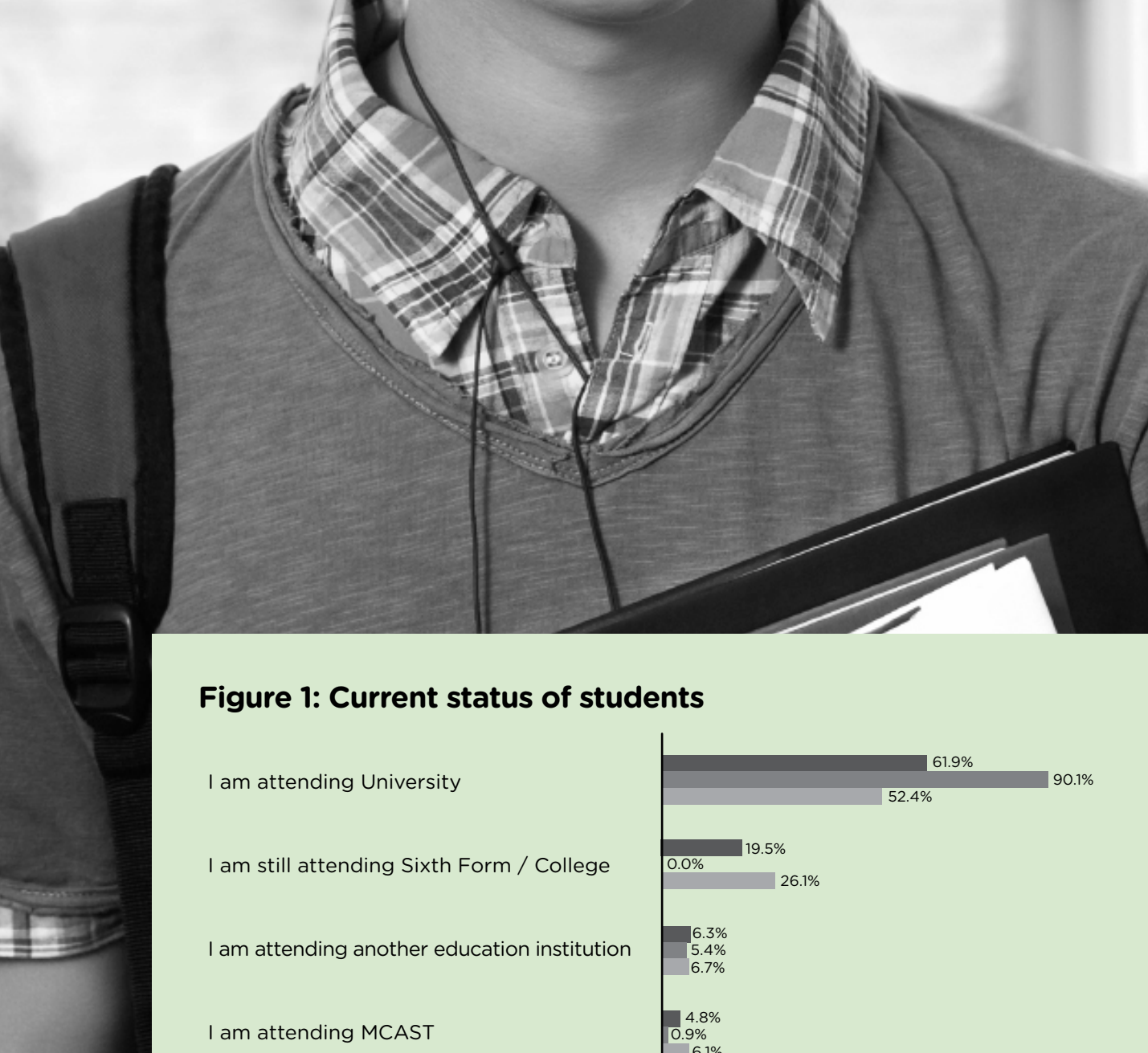
Figure 1: Current status of students

I am attending University
- Total: 61.9%
- Private: 90.1%
- Public: 52.4%

I am still attending Sixth Form / College
- Total: 19.5%
- Private: 0.0%
- Public: 26.1%

I am attending another education institution
- Total: 6.3%
- Private: 5.4%
- Public: 6.7%

I am attending MCAST
- Total: 4.8%
- Private: 0.9%
- Public: 6.1%

I am attending ITS
- Total: 0.2%
- Private: 0.0%
- Public: 0.3%

I am working part-time
- Total: 20.9%
- Private: 12.6%
- Public: 23.6%

I am searching for employment
- Total: 12.7%
- Private: 4.5%
- Public: 15.5%

I am working full-time
- Total: 4.8%
- Private: 3.6%
- Public: 5.2%

Legend: Total | Private | Public

X-axis: 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Table 1 below shows 37.1% of respondents were either working or searching for employment alongside their studies. Engagement in employment or the desire to do so appears more prevalent among respondents attending university or still attending Sixth Form.

Table 1: Participation in education by current employment status

	Students working or searching for employment		
	Not working or searching or employment	Working or searching or employment	Total
I am attending University	207	46.8%	67	15.2%	274	62.0%
I am attending MCAST	15	3.4%	6	1.4%	21	4.8%
I am attending another education institution	14	3.2%	14	3.2%	28	6.3%
I am still attending Sixth Form /College	43	9.7%	43	9.7%	86	19.4%
I am not currently studying at all	0	0.0%	34	7.7%	34	7.7%
Total	278	62.9%	164	37.1%	442	100.0%

Students' perception of Sixth Form

In the survey, students were asked to rate different aspects of their Sixth Form learning experience where a value of '1' represents their 'Full agreement' and '5' indicates 'Full disagreement'. This constitutes the students' general perception of Sixth Form, the subject areas studied, teacher characteristics and teaching methods. The data presented by school type and current employment status suggests a strong sense or desire for independence on the part of the respondents. The participants commended working hard in Sixth Form while considering parental involvement in their learning as not particularly helpful. The respondents lauded teachers who utilized activities and teaching methods that increased student engagement including hands-on activities, class discussions and activities that took place outside of the classroom. Students who attended private Sixth Forms had a significantly more positive view of their experience particularly in relation to a sense of belonging, teachers and their overall learning experience. Additionally, respondents who are currently employed or in search of employment opportunities are shown to have a significantly less positive view towards issues such as sense of belonging and overall engagement. The same cohort exhibited a greater sense of detachment and considered their teachers as less helpful, assessed themselves as less hard working, and preferred group discussions more than lectures.

Students' perception of teaching methods

Students were asked to rate the effectiveness of different teaching methods, whereby the value of '1' represents 'Very poor' and '5' indicates 'Excellent'. The respondents appeared to be in favour of teacher presentations and explanations as opposed to student presentations and group work. In addition, the respondents supported more interactive methods like asking questions or practice oriented teaching. In line with previous findings, respondents who attended private Sixth Forms had a significantly more positive view of the teaching methods employed compared to those who attended public Sixth Forms. The same positive trend was observed in female participants' responses particularly regarding their preference for teacher presentations and explanations. When asked why they considered some teaching techniques more positively, the participants highlighted the importance of personal learning and teaching styles as well as the importance of the effectiveness of the teaching method employed and level of enjoyability. The respondents also pointed out that a demanding syllabus was a contributing factor to whether the class would lean towards lectures or more interactive methods of teaching and learning.

Figure 2: Reason for students' assessment of the effectiveness of various teaching methods (in %)

Reason	%
Effecting and enjoyable teaching technique	42.1%
Related to student's personality	24.3%
Teacher related aspects	22.8%
Classmates attitude	13.9%
Other	6.4%
Increased engagement	5.9%
Syllabus / system related	5.4%
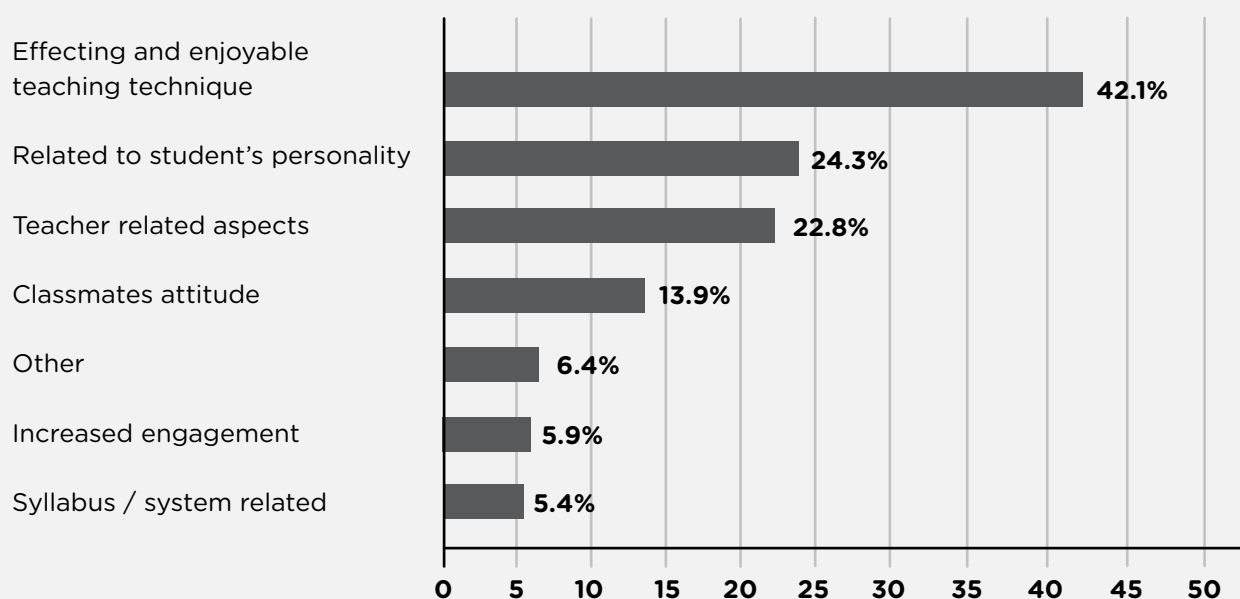
Students' perception of subject areas

Respondents were asked to identify the level of helpfulness of a particular subject and the results were analyzed according to school type. As demonstrated in Figure 3, students found a subject matter helpful based on its relevance, usefulness, the degree to which it broadens their knowledge and whether it can help them in their transition to further studies. Students also highlighted how the attitude of a teacher and the teaching methods utilized impacted their perception of a particular subject.

Figure 3: Reasons for students' perception of the helpfulness of the selected subject areas by school type (in %)

Reason	Total	Private	Public
Useful / relevant	45%	54%	43%
Broaden knowledge	34%	37%	33%
Major choice for further studies	21%	29%	18%
Teachers	19%	17%	20%
Interesting lessons / subject	13%	8%	14%
New perspective	9%	12%	9%
Skills development	5%	10%	4%
Needed for employment	4%	8%	3%
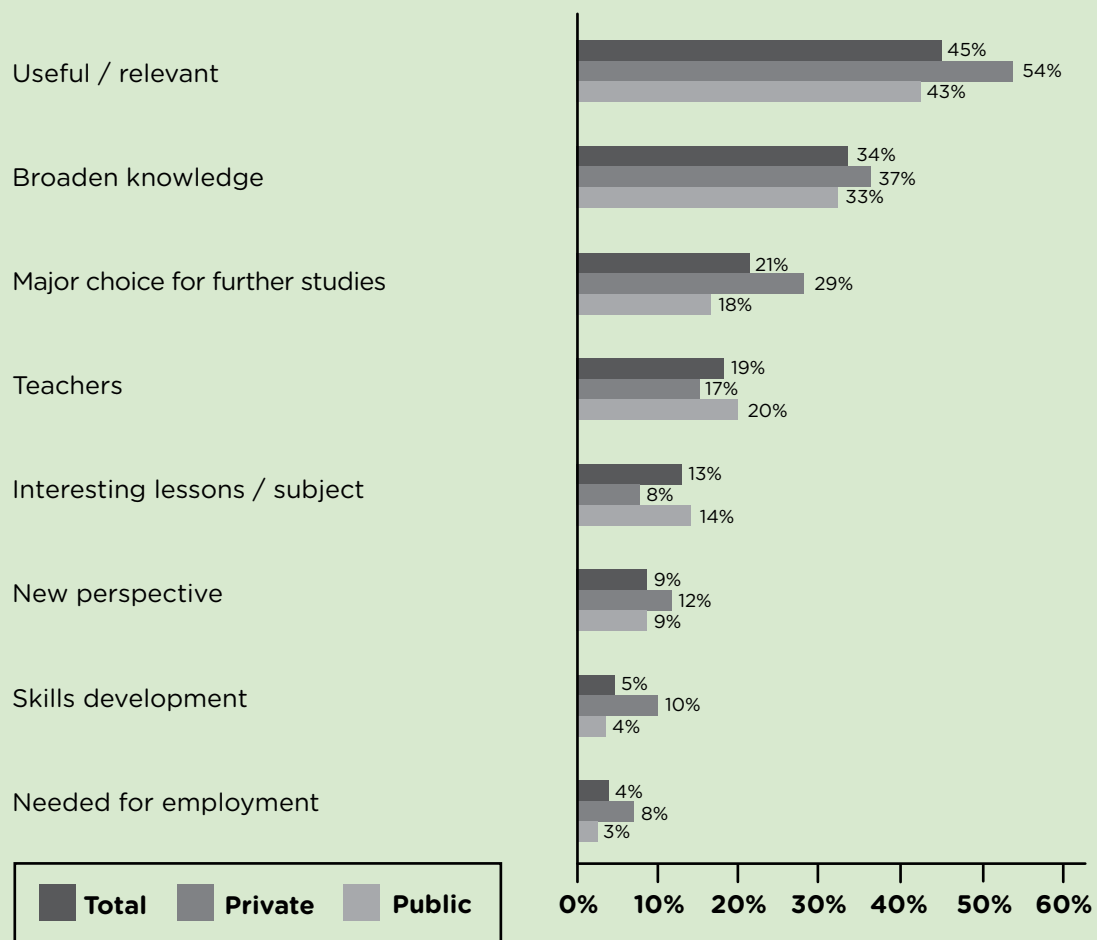
Students' perception of characteristics of good and bad teachers

In consideration of teachers' imperative role, the next area the research explored touched on the participants' perceptions of the qualities of an effective and ineffective teacher. As indicated in Figure 4, the respondents consider the use of suitable teaching methods as a signifier of a good teacher. It is interesting to note that the implementation of an effective teaching method is deemed as considerably more influential than a teacher' knowledge of a subject matter. Essentially, the respondents valued a teacher who covered the course content effectively more than his/her expertise in that particular subject. The respondents also highlighted the impact of a teacher's role as counsellor and source of support. According to one respondent:

"A good teacher takes care of its students, understands where every student is coming from, and is prepared to make things as simple as possible so that everyone can understand."

In comparison, ineffective teaching techniques and a negative and non-committal attitude were construed as characteristics of an ineffective teacher by the respondents.

Figure 4: Students perception of characteristics of good teachers by school type (in %)

Characteristic	Total	Private	Public
Teaching methods	52%	49%	54%
Caring / Patient / Kind	43%	49%	39%
Helpful / Supportive	34%	27%	38%
Communication / Listening Skills	28%	21%	32%
Passionate / Dedicated	23%	36%	16%
Knowledge of subject matter / Experience	17%	19%	15%
Good preparation (class, notes)	15%	12%	17%
Funny / Friendly	14%	11%	15%
Class management	11%	7%	13%
Motivating	10%	13%	8%

Legend: Total, Private, Public

Students' feedback on teachers' encouragement of student engagement

The survey also looked into the ways teachers encourage student engagement in the classroom and its impact on the respondents. As Figure 5 illustrates, teachers sought to engage students in the classroom through interactive teaching methods as well as by asking questions and encouraging discussions. An open and supportive attitude toward students is also cited as important in encouraging engagement. Respondents asserted that building rapport with students, instilling confidence to ask questions and become actively involved in class discussions, and respecting students' contributions are important means employed by teachers to promote student engagement.

Figure 5: Students feedback on how teachers encourage student engagement (in %)

Category	Total	Private	Public
Asks questions	59%	53%	61%
Class discussions	27%	30%	26%
Teaching methods that promote student participation	19%	21%	18%
Good rapport with students	18%	23%	16%
Respects student feedback / opinion	14%	23%	10%
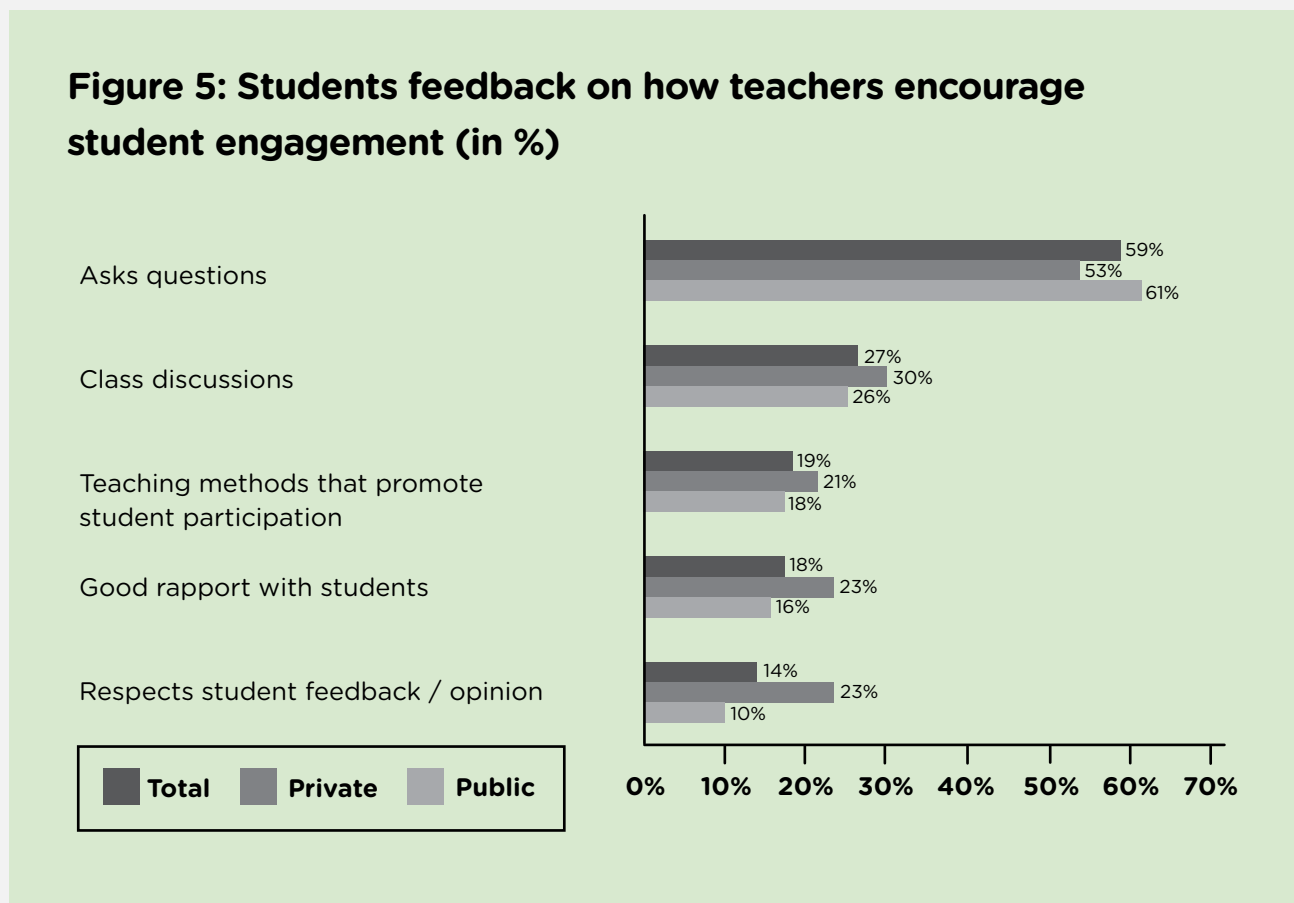
As Figure 6 shows, respondents believe teachers who promote engagement through such means contribute to better learning outcomes both in terms of performance and retention. As one respondent noted:
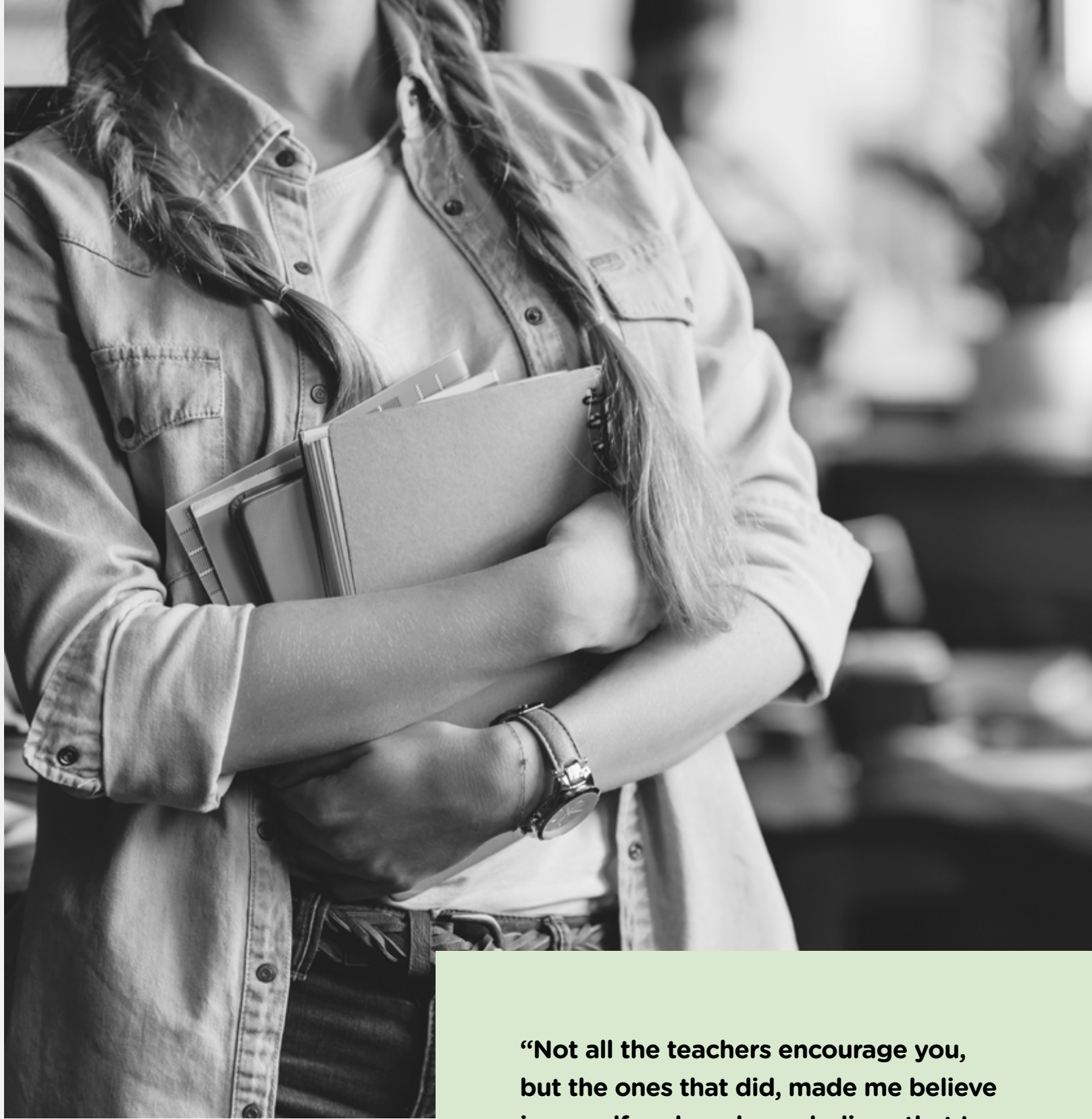
"Not all the teachers encourage you, but the ones that did, made me believe in myself and made me believe that I can manage the subject. Which in fact I am doing very well at the moment."

Students believe that teacher encouragement makes learning more interesting, motivates them, and gives them confidence to become actively involved. Respondents trust that this encouragement facilitates their integration in class. In addition, differences in individual learning styles must be taken into account. For instance, one respondent addresses how a disregard for individual differences can leave a negative mark:

"I'm an introvert and being picked to participate in class would make me feel uncomfortable and not able to concentrate for the rest of the lesson."

Figure 6: Students assessment of the impact of teachers encouraging student engagement (in %)

Better learning outcome (retention and performance)
- Total: 30%
- Private: 39%
- Public: 27%

More confidence to speak out
- Total: 16%
- Private: 17%
- Public: 16%

More interesting learning process
- Total: 14%
- Private: 14%
- Public: 14%

Increased motivation
- Total: 12%
- Private: 13%
- Public: 12%

Other
- Total: 8%
- Private: 7%
- Public: 8%

Developing thinking skills
- Total: 6%
- Private: 11%
- Public: 5%

Legend: Total, Private, Public

X-axis: 0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45%

3.2. Feedback from teachers

In general, 54.3% of the respondents comprised of teachers working at public institutions with the remaining 45.7% teaching at private institutions. The relative majority of the respondents worked as a teacher for more than 23 years (32%), followed by 17-22 years of experience (24.5%), and 11-16 years of experience (20.4%). The teaching experience of 23% of the respondents ranged from 0 to 10 years.

Teachers' perception of various aspects of their work in Sixth Form

Teachers were asked about the various aspects of their work in Sixth Forms, whereby the value of '1' represents those who 'Agree fully' and '5' represents those who 'Disagree fully'. The statements with which teachers agree most are, 'I consider student engagement when I teach' and 'Critical thinking is important for student engagement'. Teachers either adopted alternative modes of assessment, included student engagement as part of the lesson plan, or moved past the syllabus to ensure involvement. The respondents agree that Malta's education policies and the formal curriculum does not advance student engagement. The responses on school discipline policies, procedures, and school administration implied that teachers in private schools feel they have a stronger administrative support when it comes to student engagement. Furthermore, teachers from private institutions (1.22) consider student engagement as significantly more important compared to their peers in public institutions (1.49).

Figure 7: Teachers' perception of various aspects of Sixth Form by school type

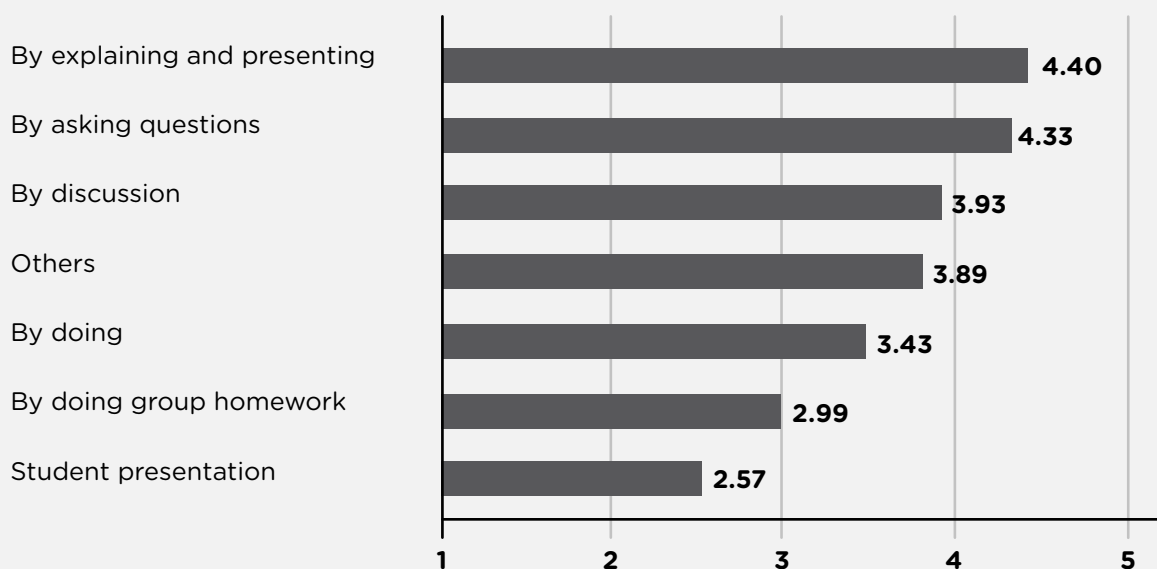| Statement	Private	Public
Student engagement involves only an academic focus	3.73	3.69
The formal curriculum helps student engagement	3.18	3.36
The educational policies of the Ministry of Education in Malta help student engagement	3.06	3.18
Parent participation in school helps school engagement	2.81	2.93
Exams help student engagement	2.71	2.93
Discipline policies in my school helps student engagement	2.3	2.96
Procedures and policies in my school help student engagement	2.13	2.98
School administration (Head of School / Assistant Heads) in my school help student engagement	1.84	2.8
I Include controversial issues in my teaching	2	2.4
I Include small group work in teaching	1.98	2.17
Alternative assessments (for example class presentations, essays, group work etc.) help student engagement	1.59	1.76
I Include student engagement in my lesson planning	1.55	1.78
I deviate from my lesson plan to create more student engagement on the spot	1.61	1.65
I use discussions in my teaching	1.45	1.66
Critical thinking is important for student engagement	1.31	1.43
I consider student engagement when I teach	1.22	1.49

Private   Public

In addition, teachers with the least amount of work experience consider student engagement more when they teach (1.27) compared to those with the most experience (23 years or more) (1.57). Female teachers also consider student engagement as more important (1.28) than male teachers (1.48). Ergo, female teachers (1.55) incorporate student engagement decidedly more in the lesson plan than their male counterparts while also utilizing alternative assessment methods to enhance student engagement (1.51) compared to male teachers (1.91). These findings suggest that teachers at private Sixth Forms, female teachers, and teachers with fewer years of experience are more eager to adopt strategies that advance engagement.

Teaching methods employed by teachers

Presented with a list of teaching methods, the respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they employed these methods, whereby a value of '1' represents 'Never' and a value of '5' indicates 'Most of the Time' (Figure 8). The teaching methods predominantly employed are explanation and presentations by teachers (4.40), in addition asking questions during lessons (4.33). The teaching methods least often utilized are 'Student Presentations' (2.57) and group work (2.99). This corresponds with feedback received from students who regard asking questions and offering explanations and presentations by the teacher as the most efficient form of teaching and student presentations and group work as least effective.

When comparing the feedback of teachers from public and private institutions on the abovementioned teaching methods, only one method was found to have a statistical significance (p-value = 0.001). Teachers from private institutions appear to use 'discussions' more often (4.21) than teachers from public institutions (3.71). No statistically significant differences were found when comparing the feedback received from teachers based on gender or years of experience. A stronger sensitivity to student engagement among teachers at private Sixth Forms, female teachers and teachers with fewer years of experience does not translate into a significant difference in the teaching methods employed at public and private Sixth Forms.

Figure 8: Teaching methods most commonly employed by teachers

Method	Value
By explaining and presenting	4.40
By asking questions	4.33
By discussion	3.93
Others	3.89
By doing	3.43
By doing group homework	2.99
Student presentation	2.57

Teachers' perception of the meaning and benefits of student engagement

Throughout this section, several open-ended questions are analyzed in an effort to inform the literature on the meaning and benefits of student engagement. In the majority of the responses (59.9%), 'active participation in class' and students' 'engagement with the subject' (47.6%) topped the list of responses from teachers upon hearing the term student engagement (Figure 9). Nearly two-thirds (63.3%) of teachers maintain that the central benefit of student engagement is that it 'facilitates learning' (Figure 30), while one third (32.7%) assert that it helps with learners' 'personal development and wellbeing'. Teachers' responses to the consequence of disengagement in class revealed a preference for cognitive engagement as opposed to emotional engagement. In the majority of responses, it is indicated that disengagement 'hinders personal development and wellbeing' (59.9%) and is a major hindrance to learning (53.1%).

## Figure 9: Teachers understanding of the meaning of student engagement
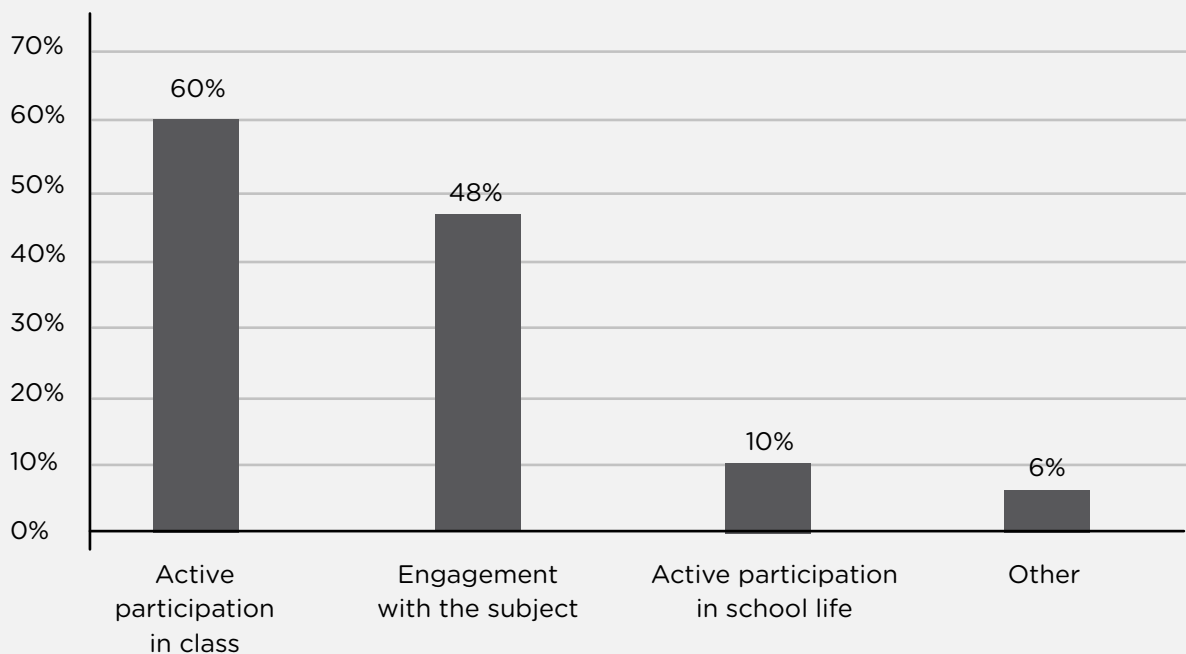
Teachers' perception of conditions that increase or hinder student engagement

The respondents pointed to several factors that increase student engagement, including the adoption of 'enjoyable, inclusive pedagogy' (28.6%), a strong relationship between teachers and students (27.2%), followed by the presence of a good teacher (25.2%). These responses are in line with students' perception of a good teacher that include being an effective educator in addition to being caring, patient and kind. The teacher respondents highlighted other conditions that increase student engagement, including the existence of an 'appropriate education environment' (19%), a flexible curriculum and syllabus (17.7%), and a suitable class size (12.2%). In contrast, the main conditions believed to deter student engagement from the teachers' perspective are an inflexible and inappropriate curriculum or syllabus (29.3%), followed by a tedious or non-inclusive pedagogy (25.2%), a 'bad teacher' (21.8%), and an 'inappropriate education environment' (19.7%). The main factors that inhibit teachers from fostering a space that encourages engagement (Figure 34) are similar to the conditions students deem as hindrances to engagement. Teachers pointed to an inflexible and inappropriate curriculum or syllabus (40.1%) as being the main obstacle to student engagement in addition to 'inappropriate education environment' (21.8%).

Figure 10: Factors that hinder teachers from developing student engagement
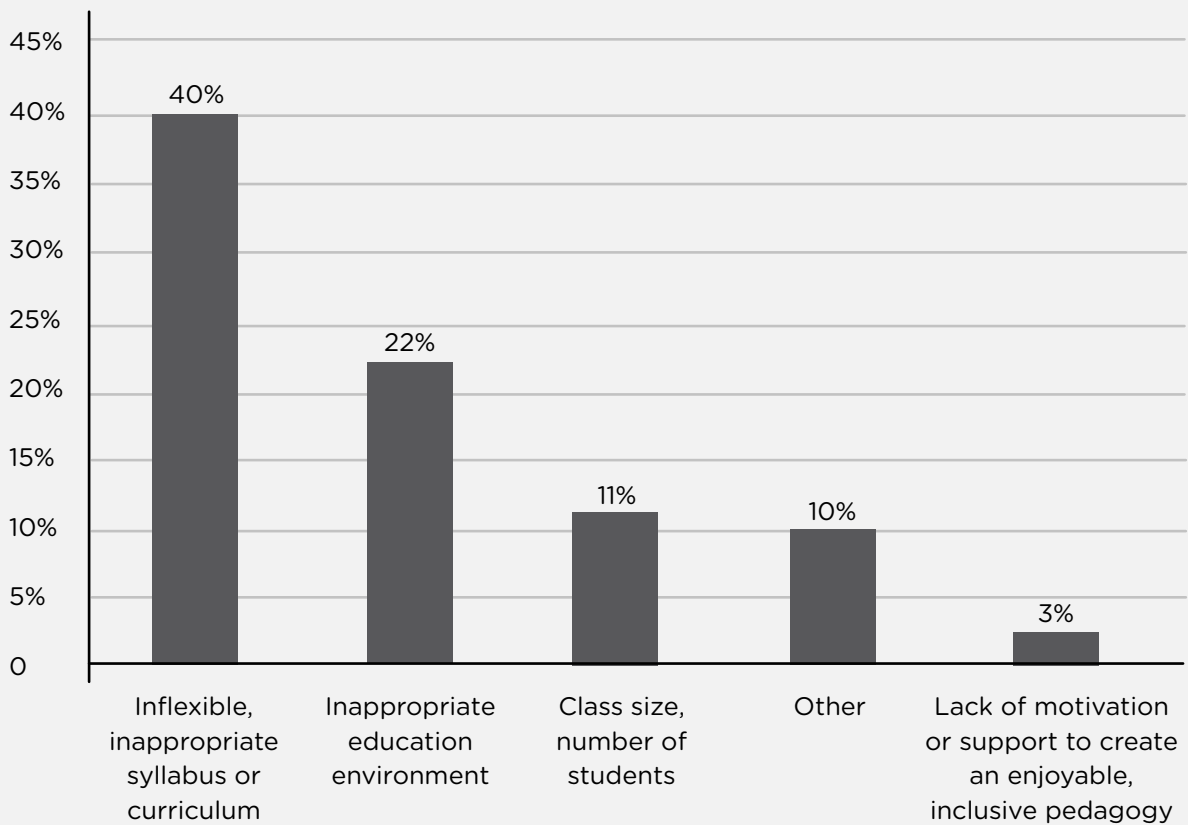
Teachers' perception of the reasons why students do not pursue Further or Higher education

As stated by teachers, there are a number of factors why students do not pursue Further or Higher education (Figure 11). These reasons include disengagement from the education system (29.9%), students' academic ability and learning style (28.6%), and financial considerations such as lack of financial resources or the desire to start earning money (27.2%). Other reasons for a lack of interest on the students' part to pursue their education include the influence of family or friends (23.1%), a lack of interest, personal drive or concrete plans for the future (19.7%). Some of the teachers noted that the educational system needs to have a more 'student-centred approach' (6.8%) and the curriculum needs to be revised (6.1%).

Figure 11: Teachers' perception of the reasons why students do not pursue Further or higher education
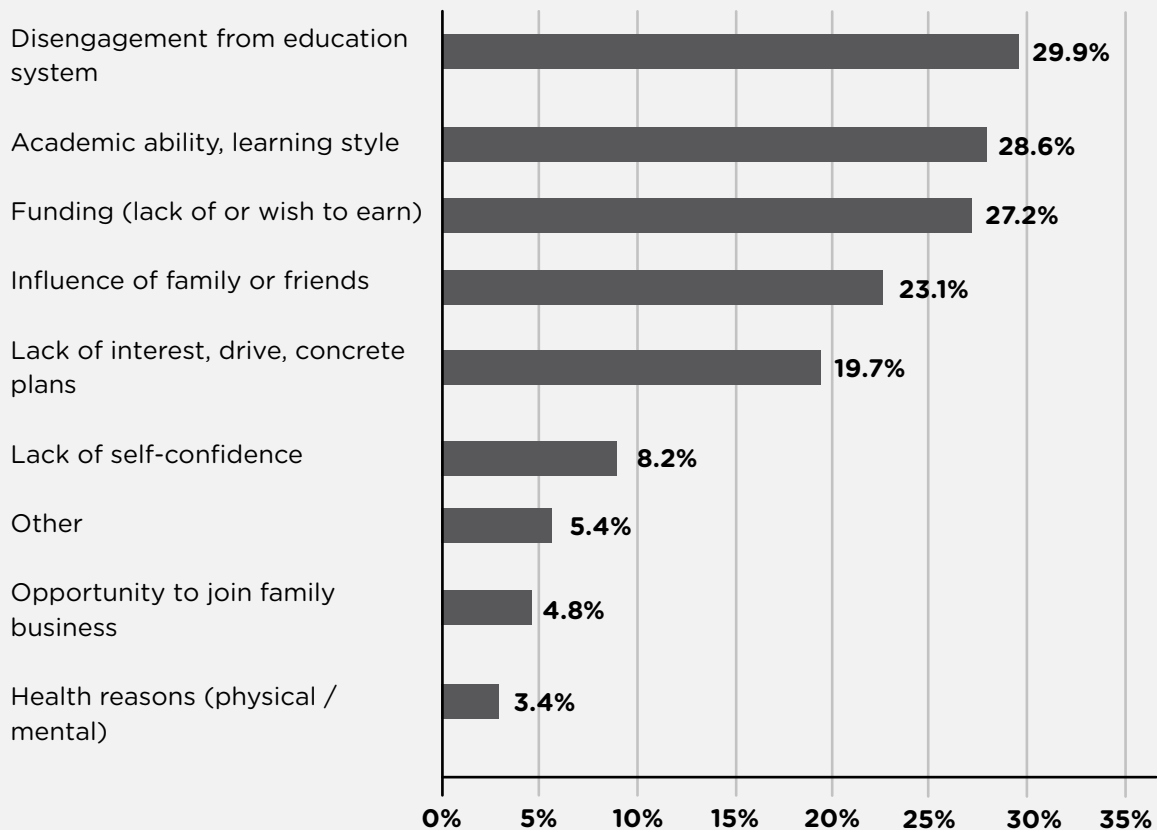
what is student engagement?

key findings

Meaning and purposes of education:

- Education helps prepare students for the workplace and improves career prospects. It allows personal development, builds more confident, independent citizens, and helps students mature as individuals.
- It trains individuals to be self-directed learners and critical thinkers.

Defining student engagement:

- Engagement is optimized when students are motivated and interested in their own learning through active participation and linking what they learn in class to their everyday lives outside the classroom.

The importance and benefits of student engagement:

- Engagement improves students' experience by making their learning more enjoyable and meaningful.
- It facilitates the learning process by moving past mere memorization. It improves retention and assists in life skills acquisition.
- Students become independent learners who enjoy learning and feel comfortable in the school setting.
- It is beneficial for society as it decreases the dropout rate and prepares students for employment.

Forms of student engagement:

- Engagement is related to the academic aspect of the learning experience inside the classroom as well as the social dimension of students' lives beyond the confines of the class.
- Considering that the Maltese educational system focuses on examinations, engagement in academic settings is generally considered to be more important by the respondents.

Signs of student engagement:

- Students' behaviour is a key indicator of their engagement.
- It improves the quality of interaction between the teacher, students and the school community.

Signs of student disengagement:

- Students no longer want to be involved in school related activities as they gradually lose interest and become passive.
- Disruptive behaviour, absenteeism, and disregard for academic responsibilities ensure disengagement.

Engagement in areas outside students' interest:

- Exposing students to new opportunities beyond their stated areas of interest can help them discover unfamiliar areas and assist them in self-discovery.
- It is imperative that students be motivated and engaged in order to keep them interested in learning.
- It is important to give students the choice and freedom to make their own decisions.

4.1. Students

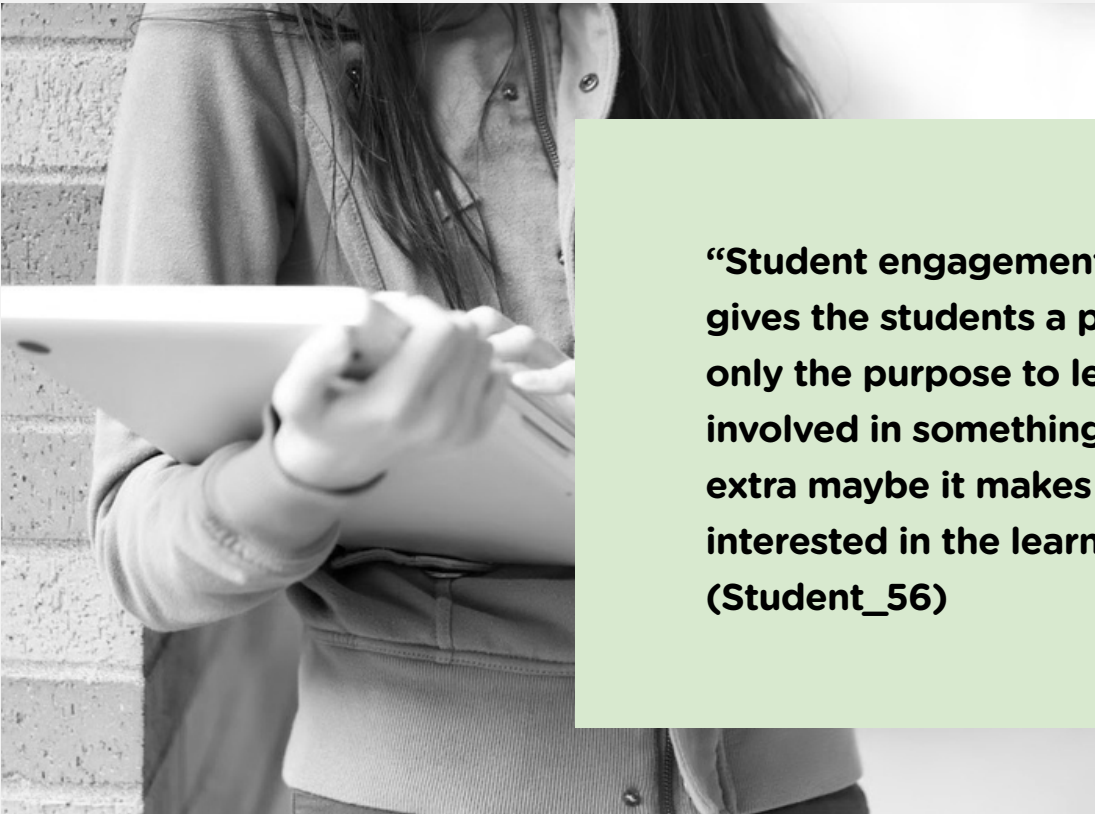### i. Meaning and purposes of education

According to students, the education system allows individuals to build a set of necessary skills to develop their careers and improve job prospects. For some students, education is essential in maintaining a healthy standard of living through personal development by enabling students to grow as individuals by subsequently broadening their knowledge base, encouraging them to make a difference in society and coping with pressures of life.

ii. Defining student engagement

Students have linked engagement to the degree of motivation and interest in what they are doing which comes with active participation and involvement. For a number of students, engagement means that, *"as a student, you'd be taking charge of your path (…) Not coming here for the sake of showing up, listening to what the teacher has to say and going home to do my own thing sort of connecting the two"* (Student_16). Another student described engagement as a two-way process where, *"the student and the lecturer or the teacher work together hand-in-hand and set a goal and work together to get that goal"* (Student_1).

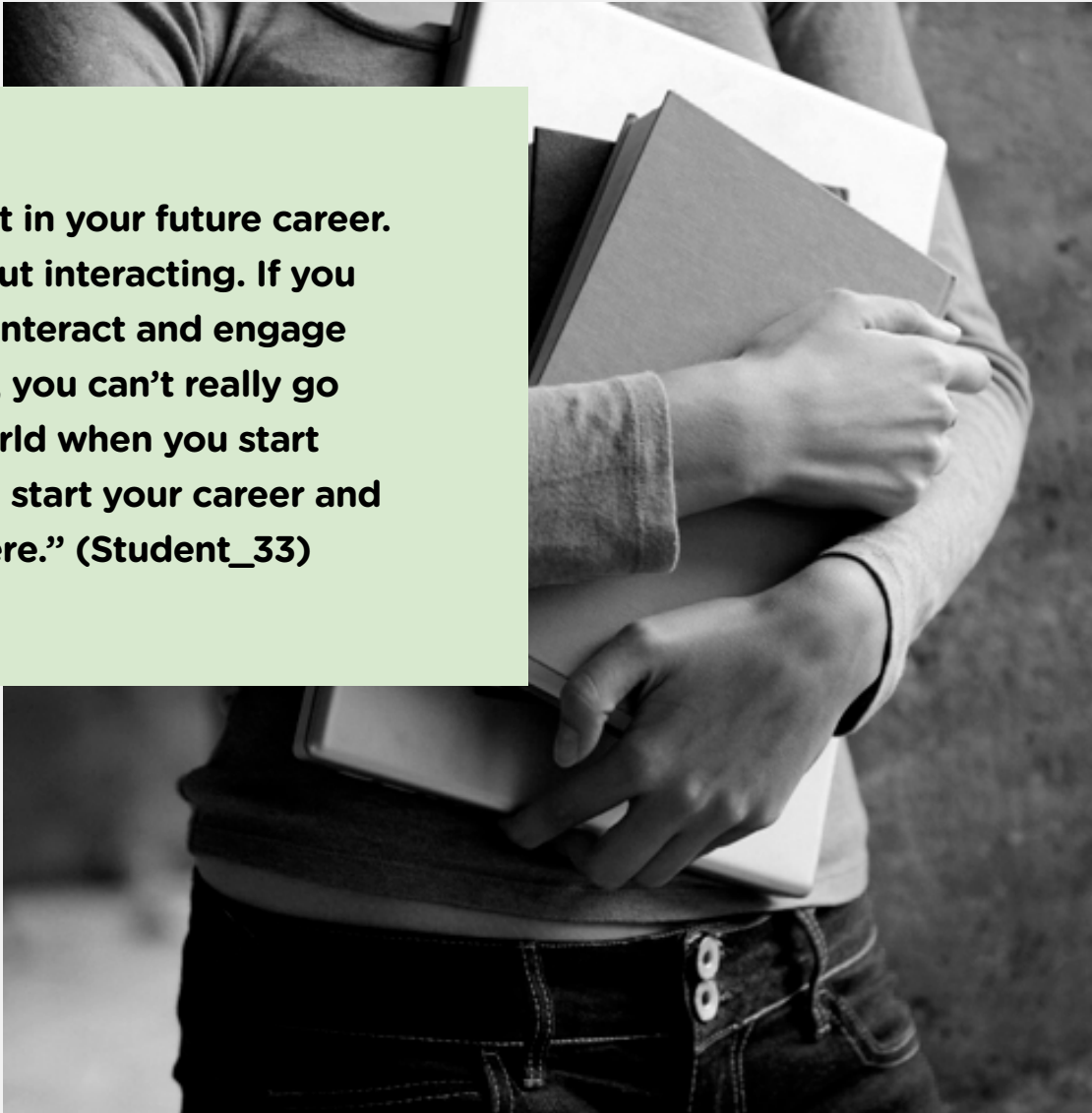### iii. The importance and benefits of student engagement

The importance of purpose has been highlighted by respondents in addressing the issue of engagement:

"Student engagement is something that gives the students a purpose (…) not only the purpose to learn but if they are involved in something else, in something extra maybe it makes them even more interested in the learning process." (Student_56)

Engagement also improves students' experience in school by moving past memorization and making the learning process more enjoyable and effective: *"you enjoy the lesson, you look forward to the lesson, you look forward to studying, you look forward to searching on the internet or in books. It's a whole cycle"* (Student_23). Several students stressed the value of engagement in relation to their future because it helped them acquire important life and work-related skills:
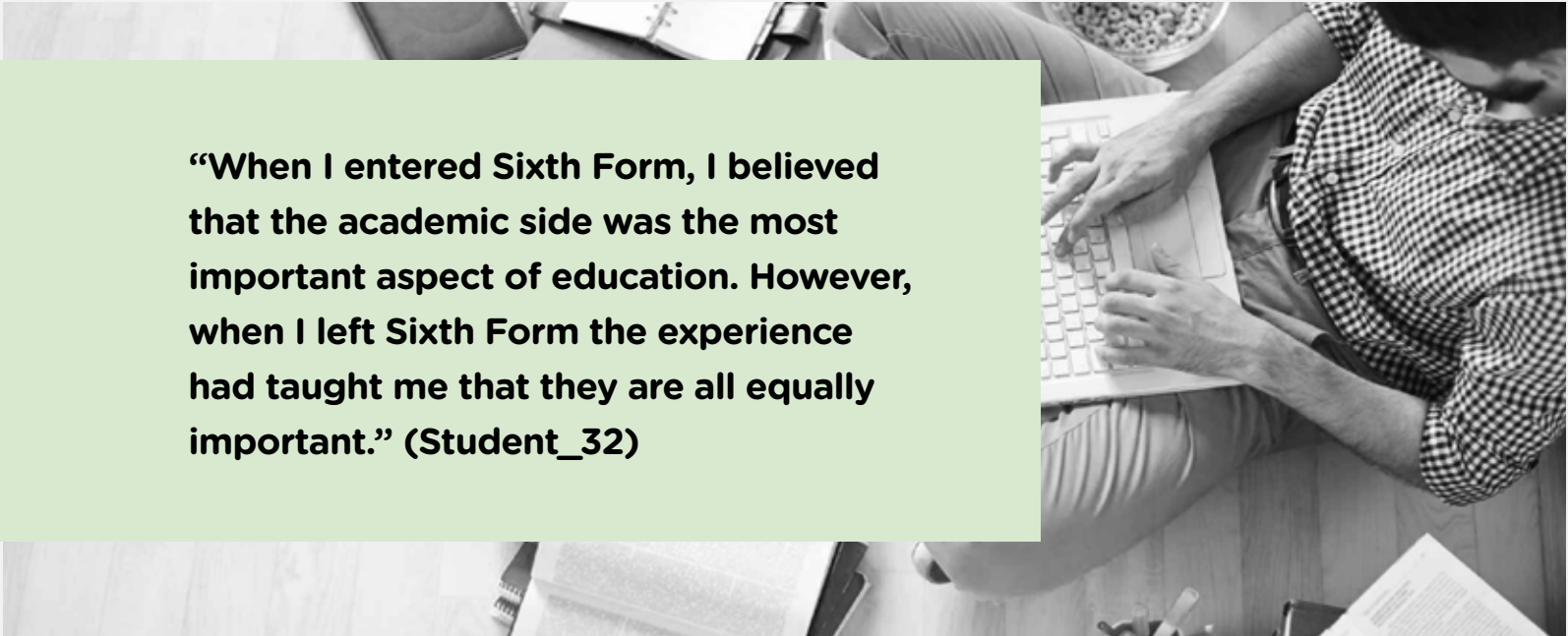
"I think it helps a lot in your future career. I think life is all about interacting. If you don't learn how to interact and engage when you're young, you can't really go into the outside world when you start work and when you start your career and learn to engage there." (Student_33)

The link between engagement and inclusivity is highlighted for making students *"feel at home [when] at school"* (Student_30), more likely to be included in groups and more likely to engage in various activities.

iv. Forms and signs of student engagement

The respondents identified different forms of student engagement including academic and social. While some students stressed the importance of the academic form of engagement *"because it ultimately gets you to the university"* (Student_31), others reiterated that both are equally important:

"When I entered Sixth Form, I believed that the academic side was the most important aspect of education. However, when I left Sixth Form the experience had taught me that they are all equally important." (Student_32)

Meanwhile, certain practices such as *"exams, homework and attendance"* (Student_4) are seen as indicators of how engaged students are in academic settings. According to the students, engagement can be observed by seeing the degree to which *"[students] [are] actually paying attention" (Student_17)*, whether they are *"[doing] more than what's asked from you"* (Student_ 29) and engaging in extracurricular activities and by their desire to learn and think critically. In fact, student engagement can be expressed by *"having an interest to learn the subject, again, not for the purpose of the exam, but for life"* (Student_23). Student engagement is also epitomized in the quality of interaction between the teacher, students, and the school community. Student disengagement is visible through statements such as *"I was lost"* (Student_31) or in students' unwillingness to be involved in school-related activities. When disengaged, students gradually lose interest, become passive and *"just go with the flow with the others that don't really bother"* (Student_56).

v. Engagement in areas outside students' interest

The importance of engagement beyond the immediate interests of the students is expressed in a multitude of ways. For instance, one student reminds us that, *"the world is becoming so competitive, I think it's important that people become as holistic as possible with regards to their knowledge"* (Student_23). Expanding a student's realm of experience helps increase their awareness and allow them to *"learn something that I didn't know about myself"* (Student_56). Students further emphasized the importance of sticking to their areas of interest: *"I don't think you should be forced in Sixth Form to take part in something that you don't like… if you're in Sixth Form, you have an idea of what you like most"* (Student_33).
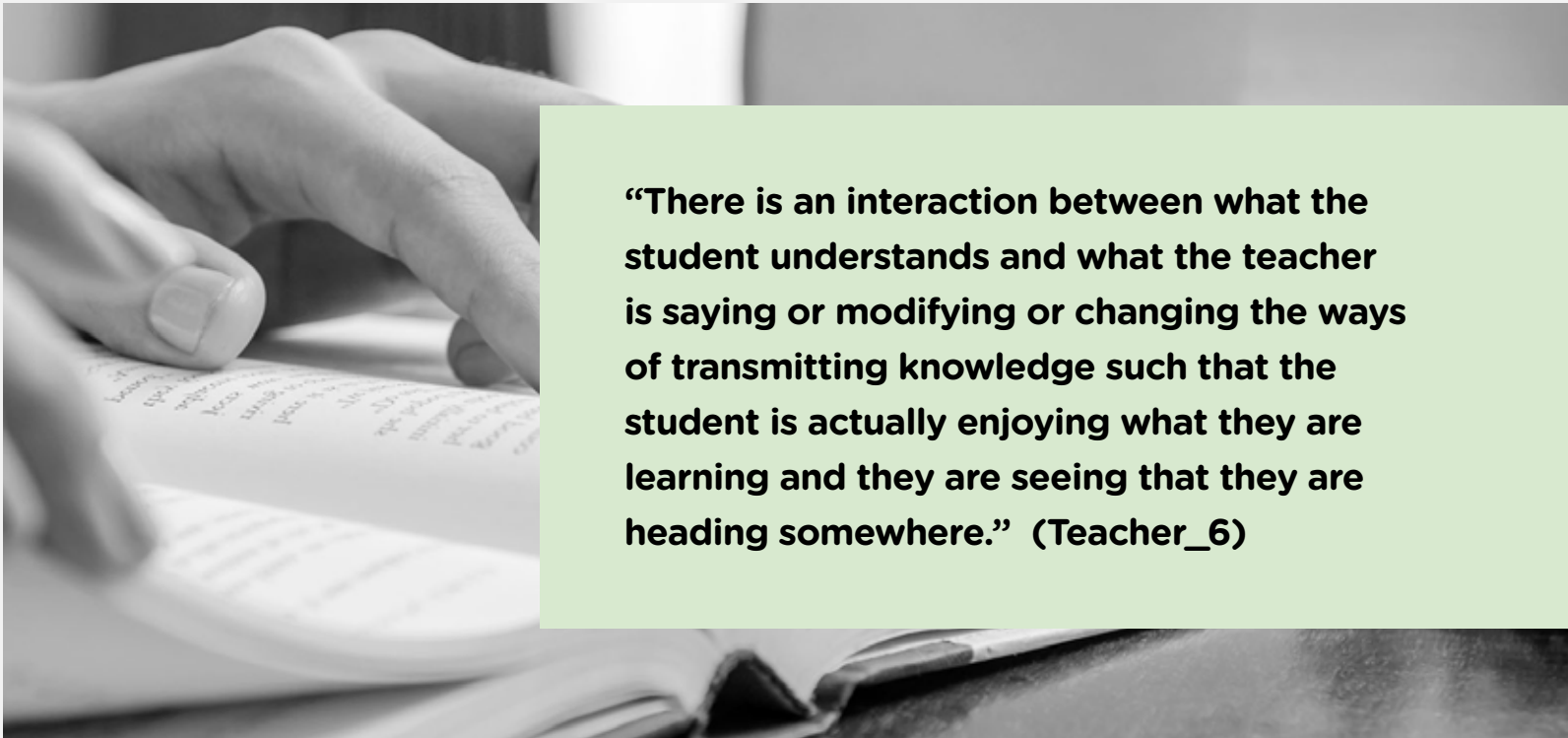
4.2. Teachers

i. Meaning and purposes of education

For teachers, education is a means to *"prepare students for all aspects of their lives (…), for the world of work… [and] for higher levels of education"* (Teacher_1). Education equips students with the *"necessary knowledge to cope eventually in their careers"* (Teacher_8) and provides them with the basic "tools to function better in society" (Teacher_6), as it improves *"the standard of living of the person, not just financially, but also with his peers, with his family"* (Teacher_12). Holistic education lets students become autonomous learners, critical thinkers, and self-actualized individuals. Teachers also inform us of the social importance of education believing it to be essential for a person *"to be able to live with others, with the environment"* (Teacher_17).

ii. Defining student engagement

Among the respondents, several teachers defined engagement in accordance to the quality of students' cognitive engagement, whether they demonstrated *"a genuine interest in being part of the learning process"* (Teacher_27), and a willingness to *"think, understand, ask questions, and apply it to what's happening"* (Teacher_31). Engagement has been described as ownership of one's learning and the ability to *"relate to what is being done in class and how much the student can apply what is being told to what he does in everyday life"* (Teacher_11). It is also characterized as students' ability and *"motivation to push themselves, to do what needs to be done and not just flow with the current"*(Teacher_16). The teachers added to the discourse on engagement by depicting it as a *"two-way discussion"* (Teacher_35) between students and teachers where they *"interact both in class and within the school as an environment"* (Teacher_38). In such a dynamic space

"There is an interaction between what the student understands and what the teacher is saying or modifying or changing the ways of transmitting knowledge such that the student is actually enjoying what they are learning and they are seeing that they are heading somewhere." (Teacher_6)

iii. The importance and benefits of student engagement

The respondents distinguished *"between students who are passive recipients…and those who are actively engaged"* (Teacher_42) *and stressed the positive impacts of engagement including feeling more accomplished"* (Teacher_27), where becoming more *"aware of society, being aware of your surroundings, what's going on in the world"* (Teacher_20) is a natural outcome. Engagement is also believed to engender a space where students become independent learners who can adapt *"what they've learned, and able to participate in a conversation where they're bringing their opinions"* (Teacher_5)*. The teachers concur that students who are engaged perform better and "their education is more long-lasting"* (Teacher_27):

"Without student engagement, a student is [like] a robot. Studying gets harder, because he will have to learn, try to remember, reproduce, the problem is that sometimes he gets a grade one by doing that." (Teacher_31)
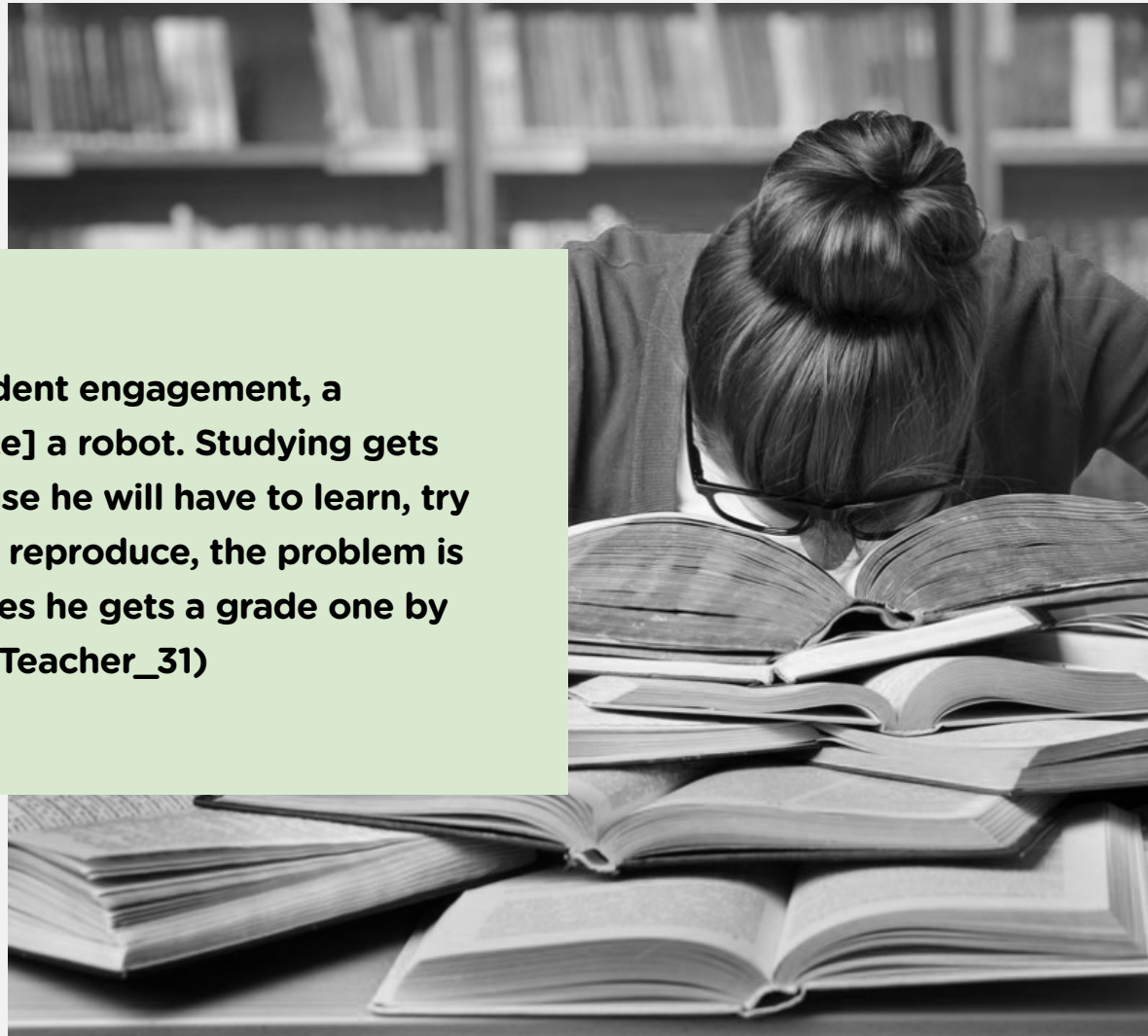
Engagement is important because of the sense of commitment that it brings while also improving retention because if students are *"disengaged, [they] might decide to stop education, to quit ..."* (Teacher_36). Student engagement is also bound to have its fair share of advantages for society since *"active students would lead to active citizens"* (Teacher_35). The form and level of engagement exhibited by students is also seen as an indicator of how they will behave in their work place. The respondents pointed to the positive impact of student engagement on the teacher's experience due to the fact that, *"when the students are engaged, the teacher is happier, more satisfied and fulfilled that she has done her job"* (Teacher_31).

**iv. Forms and signs of student engagement**

As reported by teachers, different forms of engagement correspond with the teaching methods utilized during lessons such as, *"role play, applied, hands-on work, [and] presenting verbal presentations"* (Teacher_27). Teachers also consider students' social interactions such as participation in extracurricular activities and projects, exchange programs, and student councils as a mode of engagement. Teachers highlight the social aspects of engagement by stating that it can take on the form of *"socializing on the playground or [during] the breaks"* (Teacher_5). Whereas some participants underline the importance of different forms of engagement because *"If one [form] doesn't develop, the rest will not develop"* (Teacher_16), others affirm that the academic aspect should be prioritized considering that *"the bottom line is they have to pass. If they don't pass either from first to second year or from their A level exams, they have to drop out without having a chance"* (Teacher_12). In the interviews, several teachers referred to students' in-class behaviour as a key indicator of engagement particularly as evidenced by their interest in the learning process, expression of points of view and aspirations for self-directed learning. These teachers believe that when students are *"highly motivated to learn"* (Teacher_3), they *"connect a subject to other subjects they have learned"* (Teacher_31), and do *"whatever it takes to get that great outcome at the end"* (Teacher_3).

v. Signs of student disengagement

As identified by the interviewed teachers, general signifiers of student disengagement are disruptive behaviour, absenteeism, and indifference toward academic responsibilities. Disengaged students are mostly passive and have lost interest in learning. These students do the bare minimum, pay little attention to what goes on in class, rarely go beyond what is required of them, and are *"just sitting there and waiting for the time to pass"* (Teacher_10).

vi. Engagement in areas outside students' interest

In response to the question regarding students' engagement in matters outside their areas of interest, several teachers called for a more holistic outlook. As stated by teachers, students need to be *"trained to seek alternative areas of engagement because otherwise they will not gain a holistic education"* (Teacher_8). The more pragmatic position that *"in life we cannot do only [do] things that interest us"* (Teacher_8) has also been endorsed by a number of respondents. Another issue attended to by teachers relates to the necessity to expose students to different fields so as to help them,
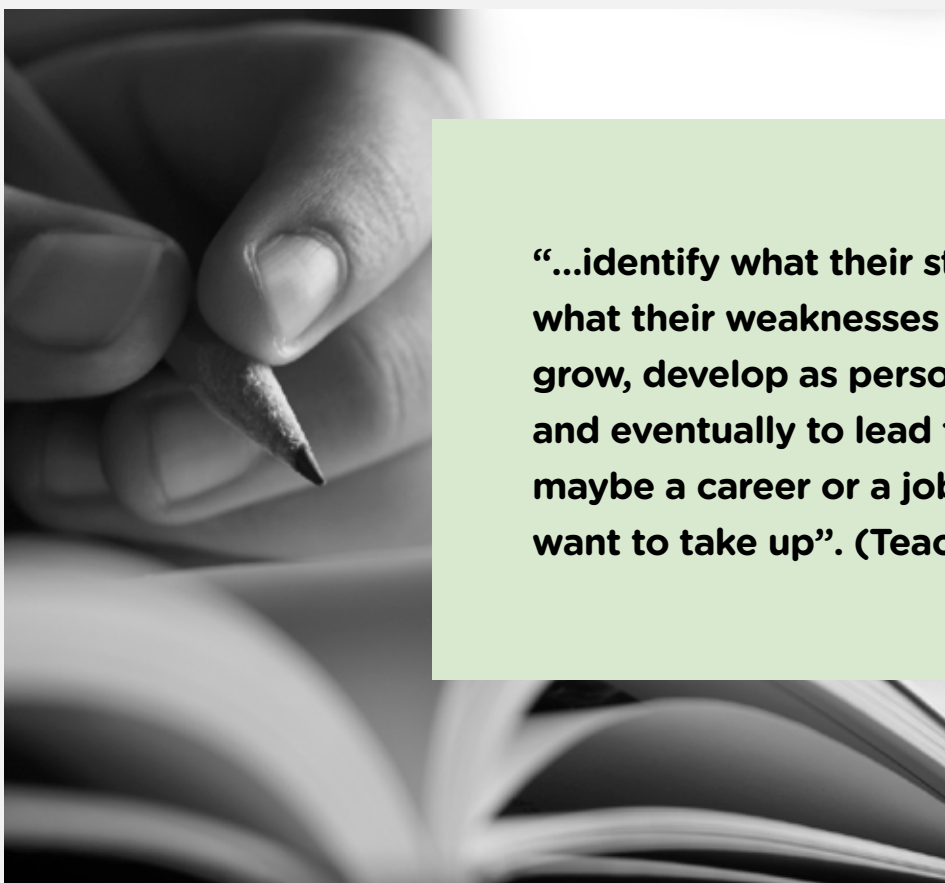
"...identify what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, to help them grow, develop as persons, individuals and eventually to lead them towards maybe a career or a job that they might want to take up". (Teacher_31)

Teachers reiterated the need to help students understand why engaging in areas outside their interest zones may be constructive in the long run.

4.3. Administrators

i. Meaning and purposes of education

A number of interviewed administrators focused on the purpose of education as a primarily academic endeavour in light of Malta's examination-based educational system. This is while, other administrators focused on the overall purpose of education and highlighted its impact on the formation of independent individuals in society:

"One of the purposes [of education] is to help students develop evaluative and analytical abilities. That's the academic part of it, but ultimately we are also trying to teach students how to be good, contributing members of society. That's essentially what our goal is in education." (Ad_2)

Another objective of education is to help students become *"more independent and less dependent on others to find it in themselves to support themselves"* (Ad_5). Administrators drew attention to the citizenship aspect of education and the need to help students grow *"into productive citizens knowing their duties, their rights, giving them and letting them know what they are good at, and hopefully they will lead a productive life* (Ad_3). Two administrators succinctly summed up the purpose of education in the following manner:

"...the purpose of education in my view is to help each and every individual to fulfil his dreams his potential..." (Ad_8).
"Education should be the growth of the whole person. It's not just the intellectual enhancement, but the growth of the whole person." (Ad_14)

ii. Defining student engagement

Administrators used terms such as passion, involvement, participation, interest, commitment and enthusiasm to interpret student engagement as going the extra mile, adopting an active role in the classroom, and not being passive recipients of knowledge. Administrators understand engagement as student attempts to take control of their own learning and acknowledging the relevance of education to their lives. This point is further developed by one administrator who states, *"Student engagement would mean that they are seeing the relevance of what they are doing and they are not just a number or just attending as a means to an end to get the stipend"* (Ad_7). While some administrators confine engagement to activities carried out in the classroom, others recognize the social aspect of engagement as well:

"...the ideal student, is the student who engages himself not just in one particular aspect of the school but in a holistic manner involving himself in each and every aspect because what the school does, whatever we do, we are doing it to help the individual to evolve." (Ad_8).

iii. The importance and benefits of student engagement

Administrators consider engagement as *"the basis of education,"* (Ad_9) and *"the starting point whereby unless students are actively engaged in the learning process they are wasting their time"* (Ad_7). Administrators assert the need to move beyond rote learning and encourage a form of student engagement that, *"gives them a wider view, it makes them whole … not just remembering it for exams. (…) the learning becomes part of them, (…) what interests them makes them engaged* (Ad_5). According to the interviewed administrators, other benefits of engagement include activating students' passion, the development of their personal skills and raising student confidence in their ability to express their views. Active engagement prepares students to become committed and responsible citizens who are able to do *"community work or helping out more disadvantaged people"* (Ad_ 5) which in turn will *"open their eyes … rather than only seeing our little niche"* (Ad_5). Engagement can help students develop the notion of community and engender a sense of belonging within learning institutions which can in turn reduce the dropout or early-leaving rate.

iv. Forms and signs of student engagement

Several administrators identified different forms of student engagement including participation in various practices such as extracurricular activities. These respondents stressed the importance of engaging in areas outside of academic settings in an effort to advance student development. All administrators consider dedication to learning as a strong indicator of student engagement. Although some administrators draw attention to attendance and active participation, others consider students' conduct in the classroom as a stronger expression of engagement:

"Within what is obligatory, they can be engaged by taking an interest in their subject. Researching it a bit more, not just studying their notes but going a bit beyond so that in class they can be the ones asking questions. They can be the ones making the connections." (Ad_1)

This is while a number of administrators stressed that attendance on its own can be a manifestation of student engagement:

"That's step one [attending], just being there, being there on time, but you can be present in the room and not engaged at all, so that's where your effort comes in. Your willingness to speak out, to engage with the teacher, to take those risks. That's what you're looking at, not just being present." (Ad_2)

v. Signs of student disengagement

The majority of administrators consider absenteeism as a consequence of student disengagement: *"it is very easy to become disengaged even if you miss a couple of lessons"* (Ad_8). In this respect, one of the participants stressed that absenteeism could be a sign that the system has failed as opposed to a lack of engagement on the part of the learner:
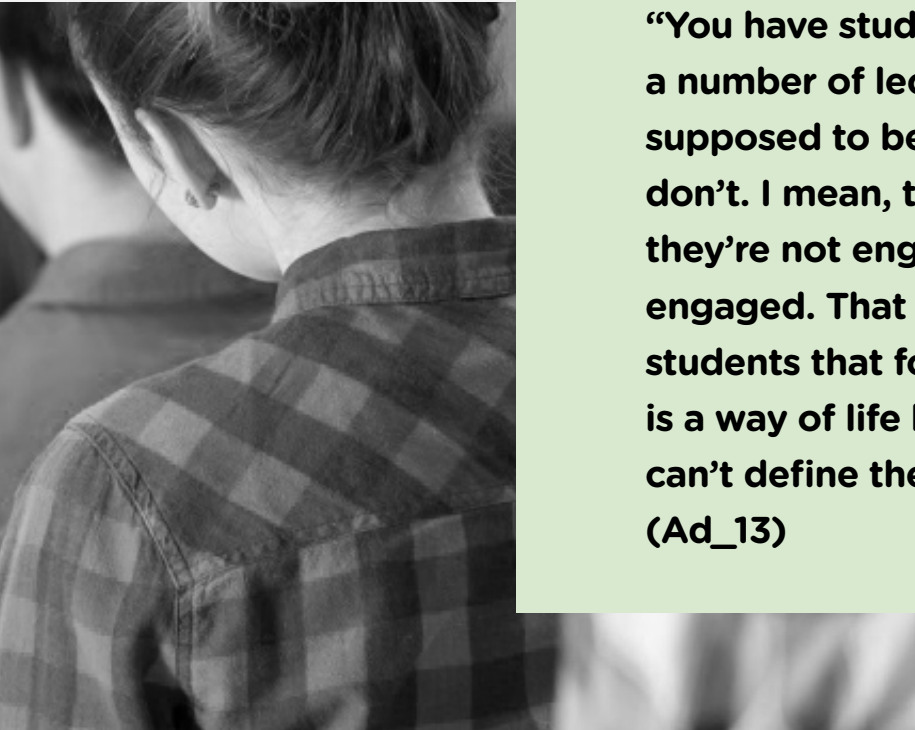
"You have students that fail to attend a number of lectures that they're supposed to be attending, but they don't. I mean, that doesn't mean that they're not engaged. They're not fully engaged. That means that you find students that for them absenteeism is a way of life here. ... but you can't define them as not engaged." (Ad_13)

vi. Engagement in areas outside students' interest

In the interviews conducted, a number of administrators underscored the benefits of encouraging students to try things outside of their immediate realm of interest even though they might initially be more inclined to resist change. As one administrator aptly states, *"Very few students are actually interested in EU politics. I pushed them to take part in activities related to this subjects... to widen their horizon"* (Ad_16) and as a result *"they start participating [and] they might find it interesting, and useful, and valuable for their CV"* (Ad_14). Despite some administrators' ambition to widen students' horizons, there are those who insist that students should stick to their areas of interest because, *"unless you're interested in something you wouldn't fully engage"* (Ad_13). Despite the fact that the views of the administrators interviewed range between the two sides of the pendulum, a few have taken on a more pragmatic approach calling on students to move beyond their interests as a way to prepare for life. One administrator even went as far as encouraging some degree of coercion: *"our society coerces us to do certain things which at face value we might not always want to do (...) society needs to coerce people to do certain things because they are not able to reason the right way"* (Ad_6).

chapter 5
roles and responsibilities in student engagement

key findings

Students and their role in student engagement

- Students consider engagement as an interdependent process where teachers provide learners with opportunities to engage and students express readiness to take advantage of such opportunities.
- Teachers and administrators characterize students as "key enablers" because they play an active role, provide feedback and communicate their own ideas.
- Teachers stipulate that students are not used to being independent learners and are passive recipients of knowledge, unable to manage their time effectively or take responsibility for their own learning.
- Some teachers think that students find it difficult to engage in class due to their low self-esteem, lack of patience and absence of self-motivation, while others maintain that students are grade-oriented and more inclined to learn though memorization.

Teachers and their roles in student engagement

- The presence of cooperative and motivated teachers who encourage mutual confidence and trust leads to greater student engagement.
- Students view their teachers as potential role models who can keep them motivated. Students also believe teachers should embody a supportive role by being understanding, committed and responsive to their needs.
- Teachers envision their own role as encouraging and inspirational. They believe in involving students in the learning process and ensuring that learners are engaged, understood and accepted.

Administrators and their role in student engagement

- Although some administrators have confidence in their role as guides, others believe in taking on a more bureaucratic role.
- Some students perceive administrators in a very positive light. This rapport was built because students felt that administrators have a genuine interest in them and are easily accessible.
- Other students expressed a less positive attitude toward administrators specially when no support was provided by the latter unless it was of an administrative nature.

Parents and their role in student engagement

- Even though students viewed parental involvement as crucial to their success, they felt that parents should provide behind-the-scenes support and avoid excessive interference.
- Teachers suggested that parents need to be more active, because as young adults students still need parental guidance and involvement.
- Administrators advocated a more supportive and less direct parental involvement.

5.1. Students

i. Students' responsibility in the engagement process

The students taking part in the interviews asserted that their responsibility is to adopt an active role in the learning process and move beyond mere academics. These students asked for a more assertive voice in the learning process *"[through] meetings, or voting polls"* (Student_43). There were also calls for a greater sense of community and collective engagement through involvement *"with your learning, with your studies, with your school [and] with everyone else"* (Student_16). Even though the respondents perceived engagement as a communal responsibility involving teachers and students, they did feel restricted by the academic expectations imposed on them by the curriculum. Students called on teachers to take on a more supportive role in an effort to increase learner interest in a particular subject while also providing students with *"opportunities to take control of things"* (Student_30).

ii. Students' perception of the role of teachers

The majority of the students taking part in the interviews consider teachers central to their engagement. They identified several teacher roles including motivating students, forming an inclusive atmosphere in class, *"understanding what problems they [students] are facing"* (Student_10), ministering to their needs, keeping open lines of communication with students and expressing support through emails and feedbacks. The respondents emphasized the importance of teachers believing in them and voiced concern about educators who appeared to *"hate teaching"* (Student_11) and relayed their feelings to students.

iii. Students' perception of the school administration

Among the students interviewed, several had a positive impression of their school administration. The students' perception of administrators consists of attentive guardians and caretakers. Students pointed to the attentiveness of administrators and expressed gratitude for the fact that *"the administration also took a very big interest in students. They organized events with thought about how to help students in their later life and how they could impart things with students"* (Student_32). Students indicated that they were able to build a rapport with the administrative staff when the latter were accessible during regular school hours and involved themselves with students through extracurricular activities. There were, however, students who reported an unfavourable relationship with the administrative staff. This disconnect stemmed from limited contact and the superficial roles administrators played in student activities such as selling tickets. Student' distrust towards the administrative staff is expressed through remarks such as, *"they [administration] won't be supportive, they won't be that helpful (...)"* (Student_5). Despite the fact that students were given the opportunity to voice their problems in class, they felt the administration did not play an active role in addressing their concerns. In one instance, a student disclosed, *"As far as I was concerned they did not care. They were more focused on attendance than they were on anything else"* (Student_29).

iv. Characteristics of a good teacher

The students interviewed were asked to describe qualities of a good teacher based on their Sixth Form experience. According to the respondents, a good teacher possesses the following qualities: (a) highly efficient classroom management skills, (b) interactive teaching

style and charismatic personality, [c] flexible with curriculum and course content, [d] promoter of dialogue by engaging students in the learning process, *"someone who speaks, then shows, then asks opinion and says 'are you with me?' or "'did you understand this?'"* (Student_43), [e] advocate of student independent thinking and learning, [f] possesses professional expertise and in-depth knowledge of the course content, [g] demonstrates awareness of students' different emotional needs, [h] engages with students in life-long learning by trying *"to be in our position and give us examples from our situation"* (Student_31), [i] displays care, empathy, support and fairness toward students, [j] ensures accessibility because, *"once you've established that relationship with your class, then it's so much easier for them to ease into the subject and for them to be able to come to you"* (Student_30), [k] and stays passionate and committed, considering that a good teacher is someone who *"is capable of transmitting the passion that they have for that subject to the students"* (Student_34).

v. Characteristics of a bad teacher

The characteristics attributed to a bad teacher by the students interviewed can be categorized in the following manner: [a] weak class management, [b] insufficient knowledge of the subject, [c] ill-prepared for class, [d] weak display of self-discipline including being constantly late for class, [e] ineffective pedagogical approaches, [f] insistent on traditional education including rote learning and note-taking ", [g] impartial to students' diverse learning needs by *"always us[ing] the same method for everyone"* (Student_10), [h] cover content without regard for students' idiosyncrasies by *"rushing through the syllabus and just doing a speed run through the slides"* (Student_16), [i] lacks enthusiasm, passivity, and failure to challenge students, [j]

apathetic and indifferent to students' learning needs and unable to *"connect with us students on an actual personal level"* (Student 16), [k] unapproachable, impatient, and arrogant, [l] does not display same level of support for all students and gives preferential treatment.

vi. The role of parents in student engagement

A number of the students interviewed support their parents' involvement and view it as an important source of encouragement and support. For these students, parents have *"always been a driving force as far as education is concerned"* (Student_49). The supportive role of parents is emphasized because *"they can help...keep you motivated. Keep you focused"* (Student_10). Parents are also shown to have a vital role in the students' chosen field of study. According to one student, when the parents *"realized after my first year that I had chosen the wrong subjects to study, they encouraged me to try again and take other subjects and to see what suits me more (...) At that time I wouldn't have been able to support my own self, I'd need my parents* (Student_56). This is while other students indicated that during Sixth Form they had become quite independent and that *"at that point they have to sort of let their children go, push them a bit to sort of get out there"* (Student_62). A number of respondents pointed to the generation gap and the difference in the level of education between parents and teachers which at times is a prohibiting factor in light of the fact that parents, *"never quite understood sometimes the importance of certain decisions I was making or the struggles I was having because they hadn't been through them themselves* (Student_32). There are also indications that parents push students toward making certain choices including receiving private lessons or taking part in A level courses in spite of students' unwillingness or inability to succeed.

5.2. Teachers

i. The role of students in student engagement

According to the teachers interviewed, students play a central role in their level of engagement because as educators *"We can help them do it, but ultimately, it depends on them"* (Teacher_12). In general, teachers believed that *"students have to be given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning because we cannot do everything for them"* (Teacher_11). Teachers underscore the importance of having goals and the commitment and responsibility it requires to achieve these goals (Teacher_24). In the eyes of teachers, students are key to the engagement process in that they *"should have an interactive role with the lecturer, they should give him positive and negative feedback, ask when they do not understand and they should also contribute their own ideas even if they are different from those of the lecturers* (Teacher 10). Although the teachers interviewed complained about students' lack of engagement, they did indicate that encouragement on the part of teachers plays a constructive role in getting students involved in the learning process.
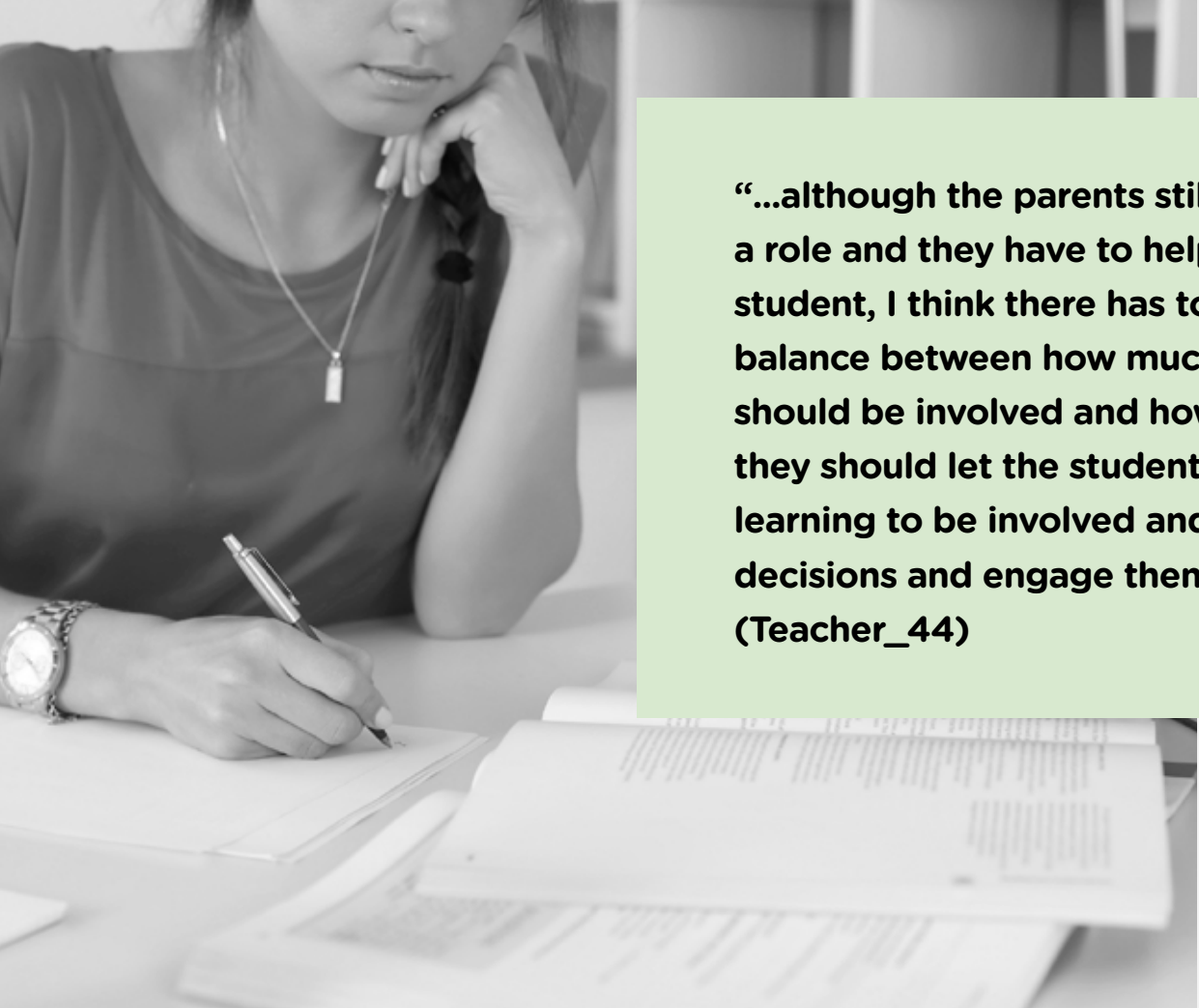
The main problem, according to some teachers, derives from the fact that *"students are used to be spoon fed, especially that they are just coming from secondary school. So everything is out there for them and they do not do much independent learning* (Teacher_19). Moreover, teachers were under the impression that *"students at this age have very low self-esteem"* (Teache_27) whereby *"[teachers] cannot get students engaged because they will feel intimidated because of the others" (Teacher_27).* One teacher noted that *"Some of them [the students] lack the patience, the self-motivation"* (Teacher_27).The lack of ownership in learning leads students to *"almost forget all that they have studied before [Sixth Form]. They're not really engaged with the subject. They forget easily. They just study artificially in a way"* (Teacher_18).

ii. The role of teachers in student engagement

In deciphering the role of teachers in student engagement, one respondent stated that they have *"to be a form of inspiration"* for their students (Teacher_27) where *"you keep yourself fresh and always updated"* (Teacher_19). Consequently, the love of learning is instilled in the student through teachers who are both passionate and professional towards their work and *"enjoy the subject and enjoy teaching students, and they [students] have to feel that it's fun for [the teacher]"* (Teacher_43). A number of respondents reiterated that teachers need to adopt a managerial role that requires a detailed knowledge of the course content as well as the students. In this respect, the role of the teacher is expected to gradually lose its importance throughout the academic year as students becomes more independent (Teacher_19). Teachers' consideration of student needs and backgrounds is essential to the maintenance of a dynamic learning space as is encouraging students *"to pitch in (…) make them feel part of the class and also behave as though they are part of the class* (Teacher_35). According to one teacher, *"it's very, very important that the role that the lecturer plays is not an authoritarian one. (…) If you show respect to them [students], they will reflect respect"* (Teacher_16). Although the respondents vigorously emphasize the role of the teacher in students' active involvement in the learning experience, they also allude to outside factors that tend to impact engagement. Hence, the teacher's role is strengthened and *"everything in the environment of college or school has to function correctly because the teacher has to feel good in order to be a promoter for the good of the students"* (Teacher_11).

iii. The role of parents in student engagement

Among the interviewed teachers, some believe in assigning a more prominent role to parents considering that students still need to be supervised (Teacher_21). In addition, parents are encouraged to provide *"a healthy environment at home and where they [students] are engaged already at home. I guess a lot of our teaching starts at home"* (Teacher 37). Despite a call for a more prominent presence on the part of parents, a number of teachers continue to stress the need for students themselves to be in control. Ergo, *"It's useless getting a parent, telling them that their children are not studying, not doing well. At the end of it, they're young adults now and they have to realize what they're doing* (Teacher 13). For the majority of the teachers, parental engagement is either non-existent or limited to parent-teacher meetings, and consultations with parents in cases of emergency. In some instances, parents are characterized as being too controlling to the extent that *"they engage themselves too much to the point that they hinder student engagement sometimes"* (Teacher_44). In fact, one particular teacher claims that meeting parents *"helps me understand the students a bit more. Sometimes they'd say okay, now I understand why that student is so engaged"* (Teacher_37). Some parents' inclination to be overprotective, compelled one teacher to state:

"…although the parents still have a role and they have to help the student, I think there has to be a balance between how much they should be involved and how much they should let the students start learning to be involved and take decisions and engage themselves." (Teacher_44)

5.3. Administration

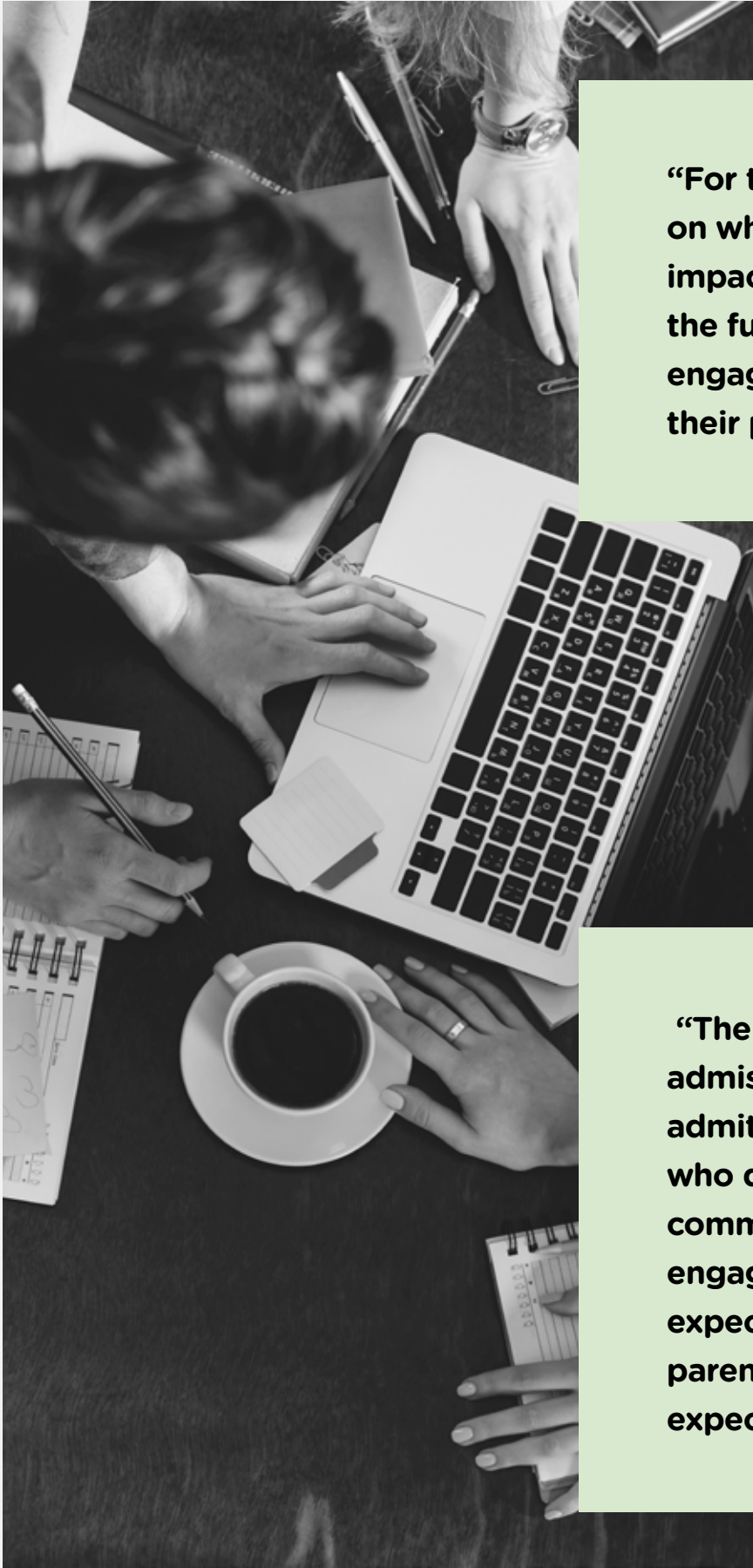### i. The role of school administration in student engagement

Administrators consider themselves to be in charge of *"promotion, awareness, taking real care of the students and really getting them [students] engaged"* (Ad_9). This can be accomplished either through various projects that enhance student engagement or investing in school facilities. Administrators highlight the superiority of "open door" policy to that of discipline. Administrators as guides are also in a position to reinforce the school's rules and regulation guidelines. While emphasizing the importance of empathy, the administrators interviewed stressed on keeping contact with students from an academic perspective: *"From the academic aspects, we keep records, we send attendance records to the parents, I phone students regularly to check on what they are doing…"* (Ad_7). The respondents interviewed pointed to the importance of providing resources for teachers and in their capacity as administrators to take on a more prominent role in hiring qualified and passionate educators. As one administrators aptly states, *"When it comes to employment, I try to employ teachers who obviously are very qualified in the subject, teachers that have a passion for the subject* (Ad_16).

ii. The role of parents in student engagement

Among the interviewed administrators, several pointed to the importance of parents' supportive role. According to one administrator, *"We're seeing that students who are supported by their families perform better, and engage themselves more than students without any support"* (Ad_8). These administrators maintain that even though the students attending Sixth Form are mostly between 16 to 18 years of age and considered as adults by their parents, they still need to be supported. Accordingly, parents should extend their support and create *"the right climate at home so that the student is emotionally stable enough"* (Ad_8). Parents and guardians should welcome the opportunity to engage with the educational staff at Sixth Forms in keeping with the schools' open door policy and relay their concerns and queries at any given time. Even though parental involvement is deemed as beneficial to students, one administrator points to the learners' need for independence, arguing that *"in this level parents are still important but I think the students would not want to have their parents so much engaged"* (Ad_6). Another administrator further elaborated, *"I wouldn't promote parental engagement at this level; I think psychologically it does more harm than good"* (Ad_7).

iii. The role of students in student engagement

The administrators underline the students' interdependent support for one another, particularly in classroom settings. The importance of spaces that are *"less judgmental, [and] allow other students to ask questions and feel comfortable in the class room"* is also highlighted. According to administrators, the school is responsible for creating an environment that encourages engagement. Students, meanwhile, are expected to communicate their needs more efficiently and take on a more active role in the learning process. An administrator cited an example where creating a captivating environment for the students can encourage them to engage by giving learners agency and responsibility. To this end, students' engagement in various activities, *"makes them feel … they have some power over … changing things* (Ad_3). A different administrator pointed to the constructive role of student engagement:

"For them to be able to reflect on what they're doing now will impact what they want to do in the future and whether or not their engagement now is going to impact their possibilities." (Ad_2)

As a consequence, the extent to which schools invest in student engagement and the impact it has on the selection of students for admissions also becomes central:

"The person responsible for admissions to the school won't admit someone to the community who doesn't like to be part of the community. Who doesn't like to engage in the community. We expect engagement here from parents as well, just as much as we expect it from students." (Ad_2)

chapter 6
conditions contributing to student engagement

key findings

The reasons why students engage:

- Engagement is linked to students' intrinsic motivation, manifested in their goals and ambitions.
- Students are more inclined to engage if they are interested in a subject or if they see the relevance of a programme of studies to their lives.
- External factors that compel students to engage are school environment, teachers, peers and family.

School environment:

- A healthy school environment where students feel safe to take risks enhances prospects of engagement.
- A welcoming school environment in terms of aesthetics, space, temperature, services and facilities can make the school experience a more pleasant one.
- Small school and class size helps personnel establish meaningful relationships with students.

Students' socio-emotional wellbeing:

- The feeling of belonging is enhanced when students feel cared for and taken into consideration which in turn impacts their engagement as well as their decision to continue their studies.
- Students are more engaged when teachers and other school personnel genuinely care about them.

Student dependent factors:

- Engagement soars when students are interested and willing to take responsibility for their learning.
- Willingness and interest can be further increased when students have a goal that motivates them.

Students' ownership of their learning:

- Students are more willing to be engaged if they see the relevance of their studies to their lives.
- A syllabus relevant to students' aspirations and experiences is essential for student engagement.

The teaching and learning process

- Students feel more engaged when teaching methods are tailored to their learning needs.
- Student engagement is better implemented through active learning strategies such as interactive methods of teaching, practical approaches or scaffolding teaching styles.

Assessment methods

- Continuous assessment through different evaluation methods reveals students' abilities and enables learners to evaluate their progress and display their abilities in the most fitting way.
- Students point to the need to have transparent assessment criteria and constructive feedback.

Extracurricular activities:

- Extracurricular activities make the school experience more enjoyable and function as stress relief.
- Such activities help students identify with the school and discover new aspects of their character.
- Students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities if they are similar to their interests.

6.1. Students

i. The reasons why students engage

The students interviewed point to a number of factors that impact their engagement at Sixth Form. While some students consider a holistic notion of learning as essential, others view personal choice as a key contributor to engagement. According to one student, *"...I said I am not going to be a failure, I am done with this... Focus[ed] on what my strengths were (...)* (Student_ 29). The respondents compellingly argue that if they did have an interest in a particular subject, engagement was more likely to take place. The degree of perceived relevancy of a subject to the students' future also impacts engagement. Among other reasons influencing student engagement, the expectations set by the school for success, parental support and the obligation felt toward parents are named as central factors.

ii. The school environment

A welcoming school environment can be a contributing cause of student engagement. In this respect, one student reflects on the implications of schools being safe spaces reminiscent of home where it *"definitely (...) needs to be a place where you feel safe"* (Student_30). A sense of safety in a school setting allows students to feel confident in voicing their opinions and concerns. One student defined this feeling as the 'freedom to fail':

"If they are in an environment where they know that failure is okay and that it is part of the learning process, you have to fail sometimes. I think when that's transmitted very strongly, the students feel more confident to try and participate on a wider scale." (Student_32)

A suitable school environment has sufficient physical space, facilities, services and functional surrounding areas. To this end, students continuously point to the importance of counselling services and spaces where they can spend their free time or study.

iii. Students' socio-emotional wellbeing

Other issues engendering engagement is students' sense of belonging that is reliant on their socio-emotional wellbeing. The view that a school is *"… like literally a family. You live with them every day"* (Student_33) can be supported by having smaller classes and less-populated schools because it gives teachers and administrators ample time to pay closer attention to every student. Learners' need for personal attention and care is enhanced in spaces where they can build a personal relationship with teachers and the administrative staff. This can be accomplished by as simple a task as remembering students' names or when *"the teacher goes down to the students' level, I wouldn't say becomes a friend, but in class there is that friendly interaction"* (Student_23). Students also find it helpful when teachers and the administrative staff keep a close eye on them and follow up on their progress by being aware of student attendance and academic development:
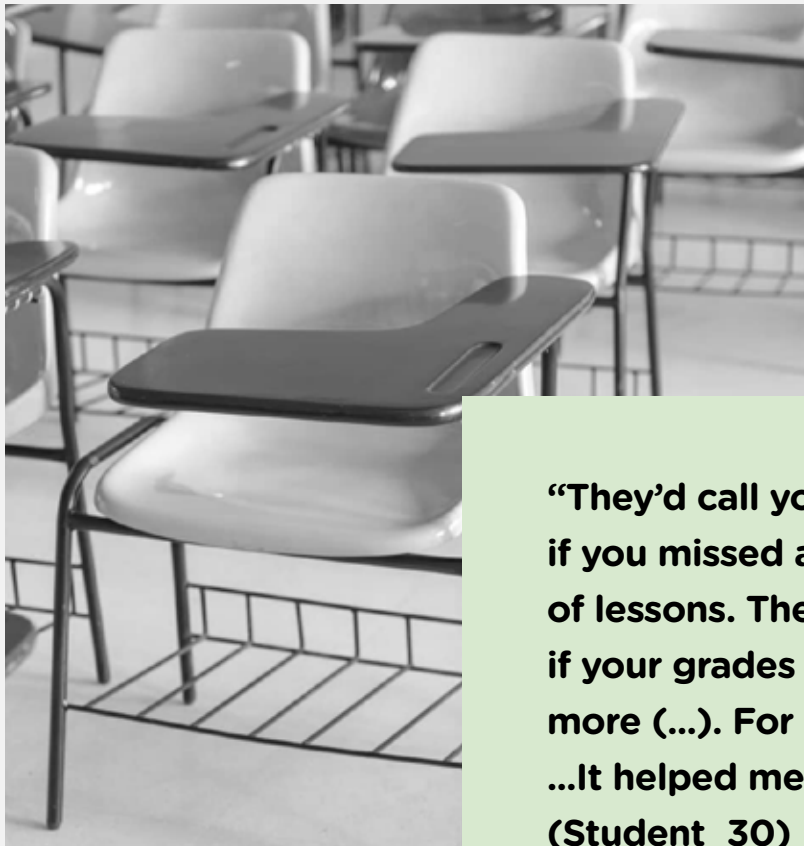
> **"They'd call you into the office if you missed a certain number of lessons. They'd even notice if your grades dropped by 10 or more (…). For me, I felt very safe. …It helped me engage more."** **(Student_30)**

Students state that when they are *"being treated as a grown-up, [it] will help boost your confidence as well as your independence"* (Student_43) which will in turn make them take greater responsibility for their own learning. In addition to teachers and the administrative staff, student organizations, student councils and peer support also play a critical role in creating a supportive learning environment. All these factors are believed to have a significant impact on students' retention.

iv. Student dependent factors

The responses provided by the participants reveal that students are more likely to engage when they believe it will lead them to attain a desired outcome. For instance, engagement increases when students became more goal oriented and ambitious and regard the educational experience as a stepping stone toward a more prosperous future. According to one student *"you'll be more interested in seeing the bigger picture. So let me sacrifice and study now, so that I can enjoy my future later on with regard to my work* (Student_23). Students' need to have self-discipline and take responsibility for their own learning can be met by helping them pay closer attention to the learning process, remain motivated, as well as follow directions and embrace initiatives. Being interested in a subject matter and understanding its relevance to their lives influences students' disposition towards engagement. Furthermore, students' academic success is in itself a motivator as stated by one respondent: *"once I saw that I was doing well, for me it was a motivator, you know sort of I'm doing well I'll keep working"* (Student_62). External factors such as family educational backgrounds can both impede and inspire engagement. For instance, individuals who come *"from a family where education is not important are not going to feel the need to sort of drive themselves to educate themselves"* (Student_62), whereas, *"if one comes from a family where from a young age they are given books to read, they are encouraged to do their homework"* (Student_62).
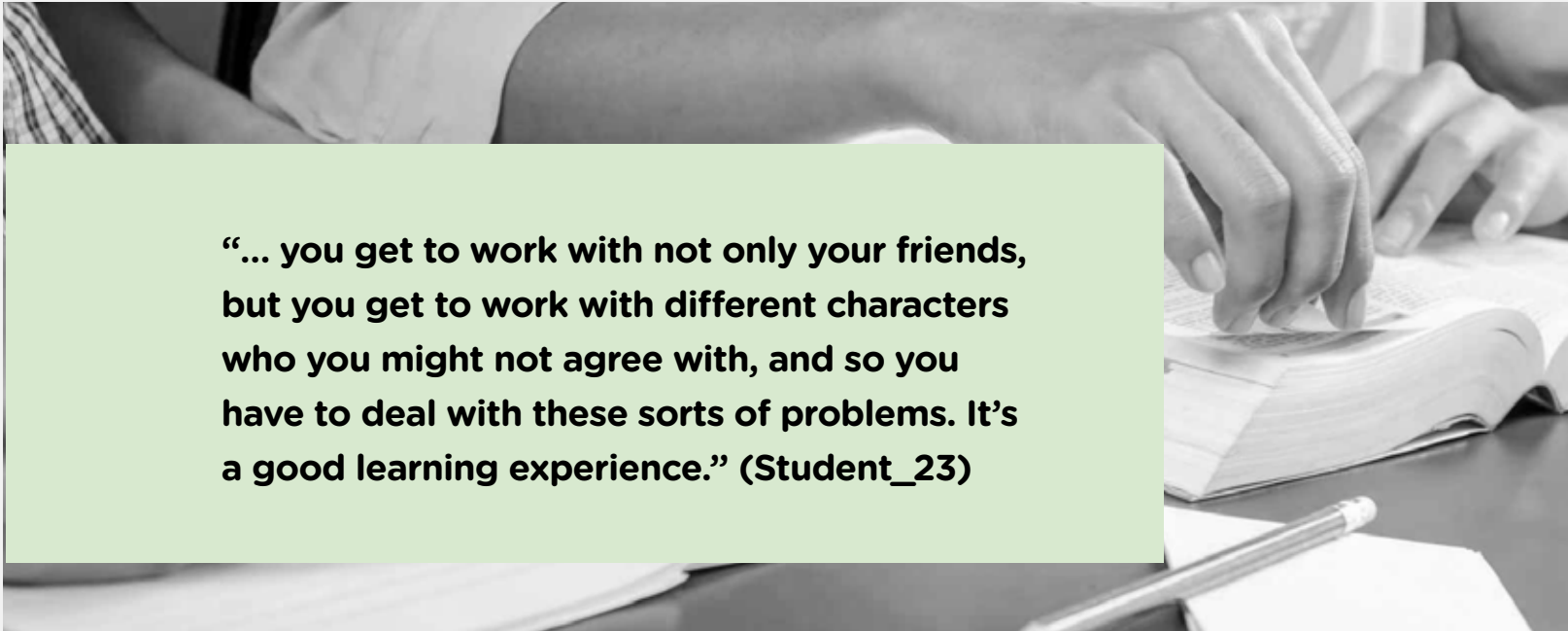
v. Students' ownership of their learning

One of the central elements in student dependent factors is the students' ownership of the learning process. As a result, student choice has been continuously highlighted as essential for the engagement process because *"to be able to do something from your own will rather than being forced by someone"* (Student_15) expands students' understanding of its relevance to their lives. In relation to student engagement, one respondent reflects on the implications of student choice in deciding what courses to select: *"It's already relevant for you because you're doing the subjects which you chose"* (Student_4). The relevance of a particular subject to students' lives and its consequent impact on the learners' future is continuously cited as a crucial point: *"...why we are studying this particular topic, for example, or how it might reflect in the future. That basically, the whole application of what we are studying to how it can relate to us in our lives"* (Student_23). For a number of students, the relevance of their studies is decided by how much it helps them in the final exam. For these students, the degree to which teachers and administrators value their contribution is also influential in their level of engagement. As stated by one student, *"they're [the teachers are] always asking how we can let them improve their ways of teaching, so to speak"* (Student_10).

vi. The teaching and learning process

The students interviewed describe the advantages of having teachers who are flexible and adapt their teaching methods to students' differing learning styles. Hence, the impact of how a subject is taught on student engagement cannot be overlooked. For some students, the opportunity to experience the real-life applications of their learning by *"going on field works, doing practical, experiments..."* (Student_7) is valuable. A more hands-on approach to learning affords students the opportunity to make learning more interesting and allows for *"practising what you are learning and you are learning yourself and you are enjoying it at the same time"* (Student_10).

Respondents encourage the espousal of teaching methods that move beyond exam preparation and link learning to students' interests and daily lives. The ensuing result is a more engaged student body who finds the learning experience as thought-provoking and effective. These sentiments are echoed by one of the respondents who states, when *"the teacher used to try to be in our position and give us examples from our situation (...) we were engaged because the[y] were something we could relate to"* (Student 31). Other recommendations include expanding the learning experience to outside the classroom by encouraging visits to job sites in order to help prepare young learners for the real world, find a link between their studies and their lives and bolster students' chances for success. A number of students revealed a preference for more interactive methods of teaching including discussions where, according to one student, *"we can ask about our difficulties, (...) express [your] opinion"* (Student_10). In addition to discussions which foster communication among students and teachers, the need for group work is also emphasized:

"... you get to work with not only your friends, but you get to work with different characters who you might not agree with, and so you have to deal with these sorts of problems. It's a good learning experience." (Student_23)

Students point to the importance of being allotted extra time for revision and practice, taking part in tutorials, reviewing course content and being tested throughout the academic year. Students expressed gratitude for being *"challenged by my teachers or by my lecturers to study and to try hard and to grasp the subject"* (Student_32). The use of visual aid and interactive technology is linked to an increase in memory retention and a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand because *"when you see it in a video, then you can understand everything because you can picture it in your head"* (Student_10). The respondents reiterated that the use of social media connects students to a wider audience and helps learners and educators build professional networks by forging a link between information and dialogue in the context of the class, allowing students to address various concerns with their teacher or peers. Transcending beyond traditional educational practices into learning spaces that endorse outdoor lectures, fieldwork and the use of innovative learning sites, such as writing 'essays near the seaside' have also been recommended.

vii. Qualities of a good teacher

The students interviewed have been asked to describe qualities of a good teacher based on their Sixth Form experience. Teacher qualities viewed as notable by the students include classroom management skills, such as the *"[ability] to control the classroom, not making it super strict when people can't even ask a question or they're afraid of a teacher"* (Student_15) or too lenient but *"somewhere in between"* (Student_15). Respondents also pointed to pedagogical styles, stressing that a good teacher *"needs to have a good charisma"* (Student_35) by *"know[ing] how to make the lessons interactive, more interactive, try to make it more interesting"* (Student_35). For students, an effective teacher allots enough time to ensure learners fully comprehend the lesson, is *"flexible with the content"* (Student_7) and the syllabus, involves all students in the learning process, encourages independence and espouses a scaffolding type of teaching, *"someone who speaks, then shows, then asks opinion and sees 'are you with me?' or '"did you understand this?'"* (Student_43). As one student remarks, *"a teacher doesn't teach, he guides his students into thinking for themselves and seeing and connecting the dots* (Student_23). In this respect, good teachers need to be well-prepared and *"knowledgeable about the subject"* (Student_18), *"perfectly fluent in whatever language she is teaching in"* (Student_16), unbiased, caring, empathetic, approachable and considerate toward students' emotional wellbeing. In addition to the above mentioned qualities, teachers need to be passionate and committed and *"capable of transmitting the passion that they have for that subject to the students"* (Student_34).

viii. Assessment methods

According to the students interviewed, engagement can be enhanced if learners receive constructive feedback from teachers and the assessment criteria are transparent. According to one student, frequent tests help learners figure out where they stand academically and lets them review their progress throughout the year. Students have expressed enthusiasm about an evaluation system that enables them to analyze the progress they have made throughout the year as opposed to summative assessments that include 'high-stakes' tests. Although the aim of summative assessments is to report whether students have learned a prescribed set of content, the pressures of taking part in such high-stake tests can be a debilitative factor and prevent learners from revealing their full potential. Instead, the students recommend the implementation of alternative forms of assessment such as projects, presentations and oral examples alongside the traditional written form.

ix. Extracurricular activities

Students affirm that being afforded the opportunity to engage in activities beyond the confines of a class can enhance engagement. According to some of the students interviewed, participating in extracurricular activities enables them to develop their personality and learn outside the classroom setting:
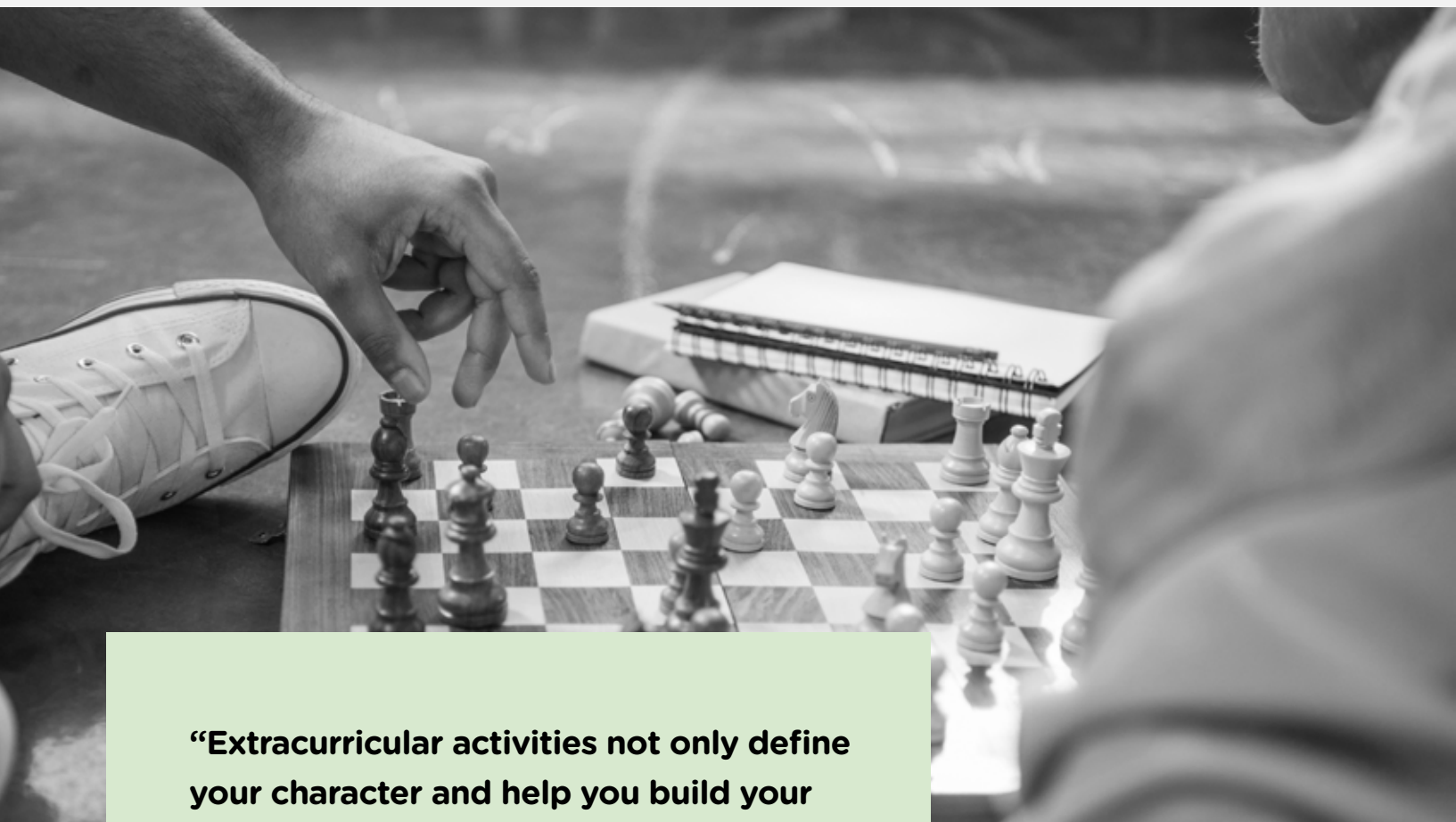
"Extracurricular activities not only define your character and help you build your character, but sort of give you that edge over people with those qualifications, especially when it comes to jobs."
(Student_23)

Involvement in extracurricular activities helps students develop a certain set of skills that are usually not emphasized in the classroom. In this sense, one student claims that extracurricular activities *"help us build our 'soft' skills. For example, public speaking, debating"* (Student_23). It also exposes students who are generally withdrawn to dynamic spaces where they can build friendship networks and *"start to come out of their shell because they started to build friendships"* (Student_32). Extracurricular activities can contribute to *"eliminat[ing] the barrier between teacher and student"* (Student_23), particularly in cases where the school staff gets involved in organizing activities. Learners stress the need for the school to create an environment conducive to student participation. This includes offering students extra time and organizing activities *"not very close to the exams, so you can seamlessly juggle the extracurricular activities and academic life as well"* (Student_18).

6.2. Teachers
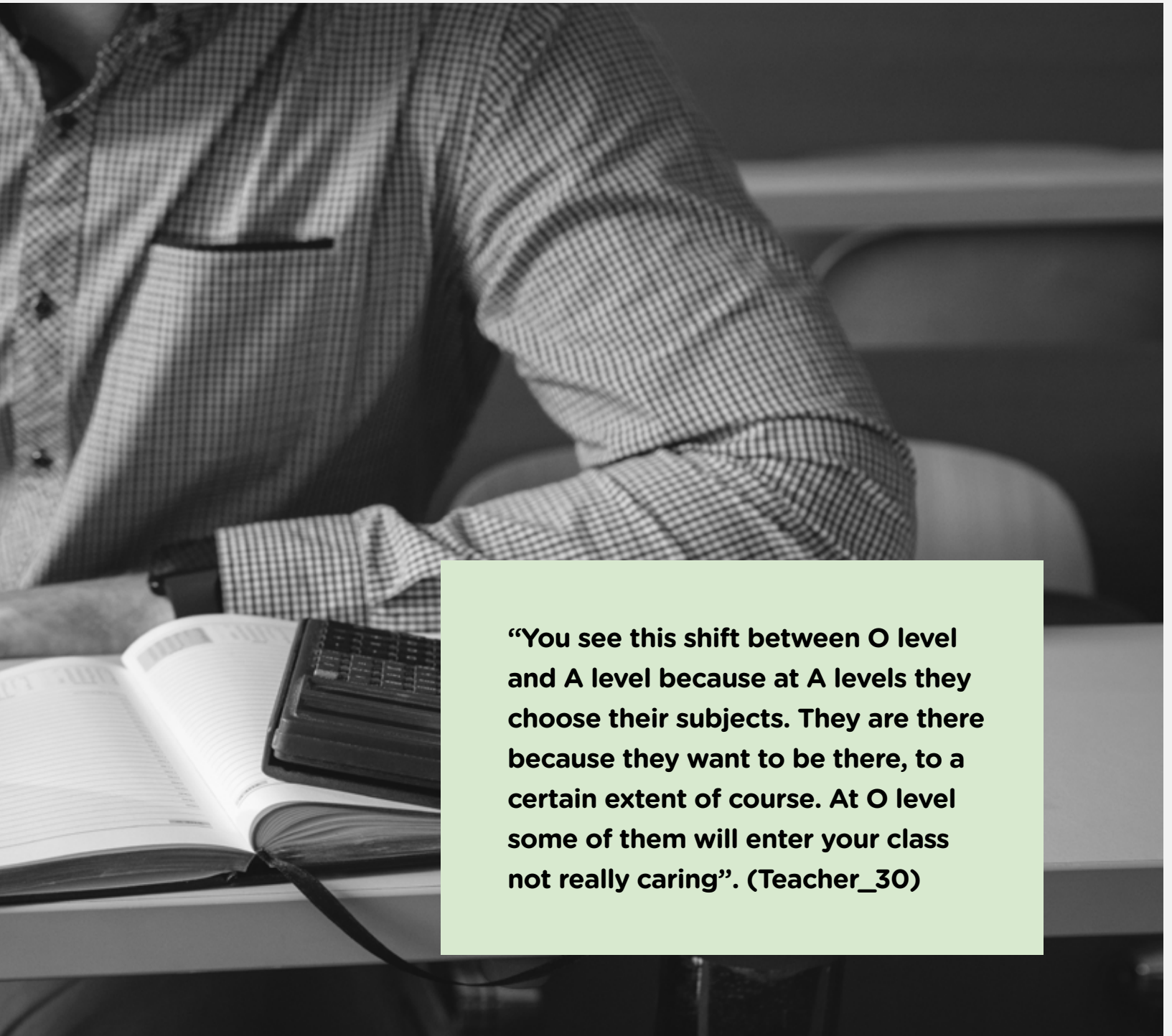
i. The reasons why student engage

Teachers identified various sources of student engagement including competition among learners and having ambitious goals for their future. According to these teachers, once students are intrinsically motivated, they *"relate to one thing or another"* (Teacher_11): Hence,

"...if they see an outcome for it, for example, students that are going into Engineering are clearly engaged in Mathematics because they see a point to it to their future career. [However] most students don't know what they want to do. Students that want to go into the Arts, see mathematics as a hurdle [that] they have to jump through (...). Ultimately a student needs to decide". (Teacher_1)
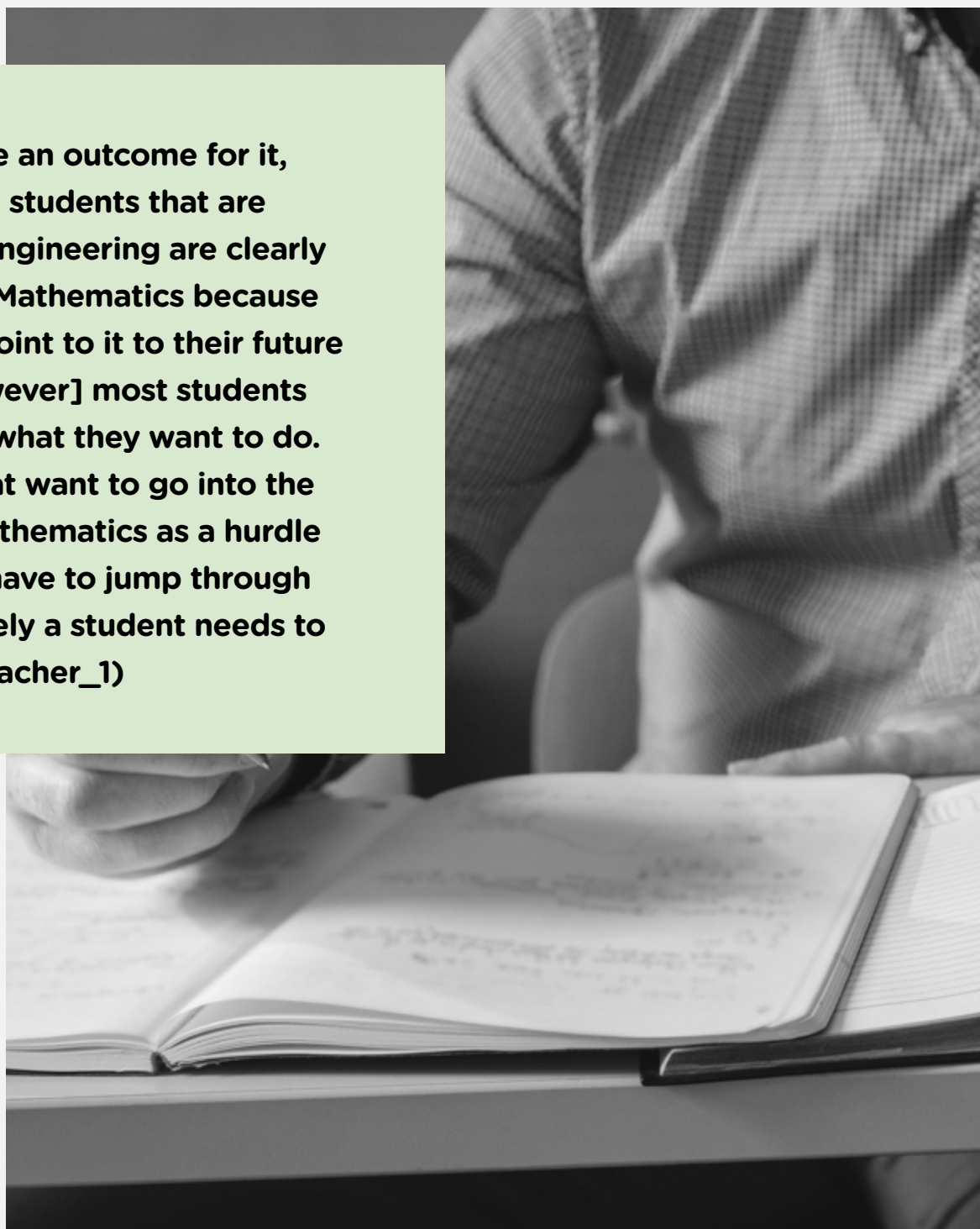
The fact that students are offered the opportunity to select their subject of choice in Sixth Form is labelled as another motive for engagement.

"You see this shift between O level and A level because at A levels they choose their subjects. They are there because they want to be there, to a certain extent of course. At O level some of them will enter your class not really caring". (Teacher_30)

ii. The school environment

According to the interviewed teachers, a healthy school environment that makes students feel *"comfortable enough to be able to take risks"* (Teacher_4), is another factor that enhances engagement. In a spirited school environment, there is synergy between students, administrators and teachers.

"The students need to be appreciated, we need to be appreciated as teachers, the administration needs to be appreciated by the teachers and the student. We have to work together and that's the only time when you can succeed in doing something, working as a team, not leaving anybody out." (Teacher_11)

The existence of real synergy between students, teachers, and administrators not only has disciplinary value where students are offered guidance, it contributes to a sense of belonging where *"finding the kind of support you need when you need it is crucial. It could be academic support, resources, access to books online, help from the secretary or from the principal's office if you need it"* (Teacher 24). According to the interviewed teachers, in addition to creating *"a pleasant atmosphere that helps them [students] be more ready to go to their lessons and do their work"* (Teacher_8), a school's physical appearance as well as the availability of adequate resources and facilities increases the possibility of student engagement. This consists of areas used for relaxation as well as study, so that *"if they want to study, they have a study area that is functional"* (Teacher_12). Classes with a fewer number of students tend to foster more engagement, because *"[students] feel more comfortable to speak and we get to know each other very well which helps"* (Teacher_31).
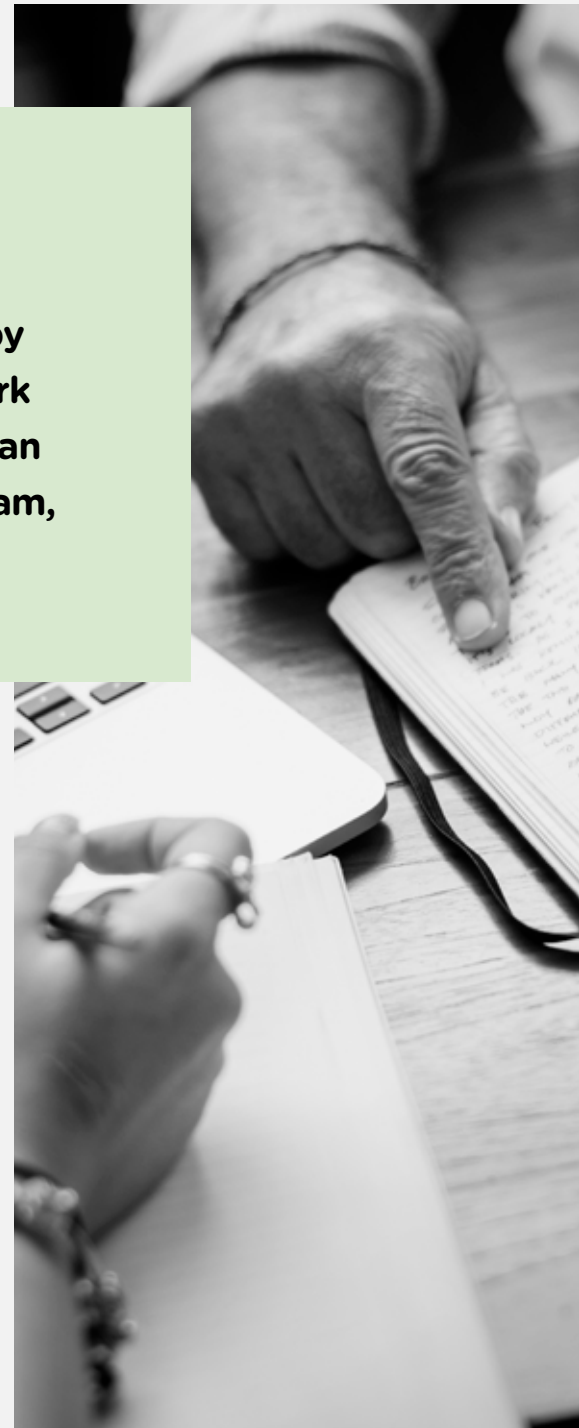
iii. Students' socio-emotional wellbeing

The socio-emotional wellbeing of learners is another influential factor in student engagement which needs to be addressed from an early age. This is how one teacher attended to this issue:

"How can we expect students here at Sixth Form to come up with discussions and ideas when all throughout their primary and secondary schooling they have been bombarded with information, but were unable to speak out."
(Teacher_14)

Nurturing students' socio-emotional wellbeing can be accomplished by developing a sense of belonging and constructing a support structure for teachers and peers. Hence, *"If your friends are also engaging in a subject, they can help to encourage you. They don't need to have the same engagement levels"* (Teacher_22). Building a *"rapport with the teacher is one thing that can increase student engagement"* (Teacher_1) and to accomplish this teachers need to *"earn their [students'] respect, earn their trust"* (Teacher_28). The role of the teacher as facilitator is underlined as educators are urged to create safe spaces for students to speak their minds and express themselves. Teachers also need to be approachable and a constant source of support for students. It is imperative that teachers acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of students and *"to see the students as individuals, not just as a number"* (Teacher_14). In order for teachers to be viewed as guides and mentors, it is essential that they propel a sense of belonging among students in class. Creating a challenging environment for students can encourage them to gradually become independent learners and more engaged in the learning process.

iv. Student dependent factors

Encouraging students to become self-directed learners points them in the direction of taking greater responsibility for their own learning which in turn can fuel engagement. In the words of one teacher, *"We cannot be teaching them everything and maybe this is the problem, teaching them everything, writing everything on the board for them and then writing it down. That is not taking responsibility for your learning"* (Teacher_11). The respondents lay emphasis on the need for students' critical thinking and engagement by *"open[ing] up more and be[ing] involved more in what is happening in their country and around the world, take part in activities that aren't just about passing exams* (Teacher_44). Students' personal drive and interest can play a significant role in the extent of their engagement because *"If they're not interested, they're not going to engage"* (Teacher_4). Another factor that can impact engagement is related to students' family background:

"...it's not just what happens in the classroom. What happens at home, I think, has a much greater effect on what happens in the classroom than what happens in the classroom has an effect on learning." (Teacher_1)
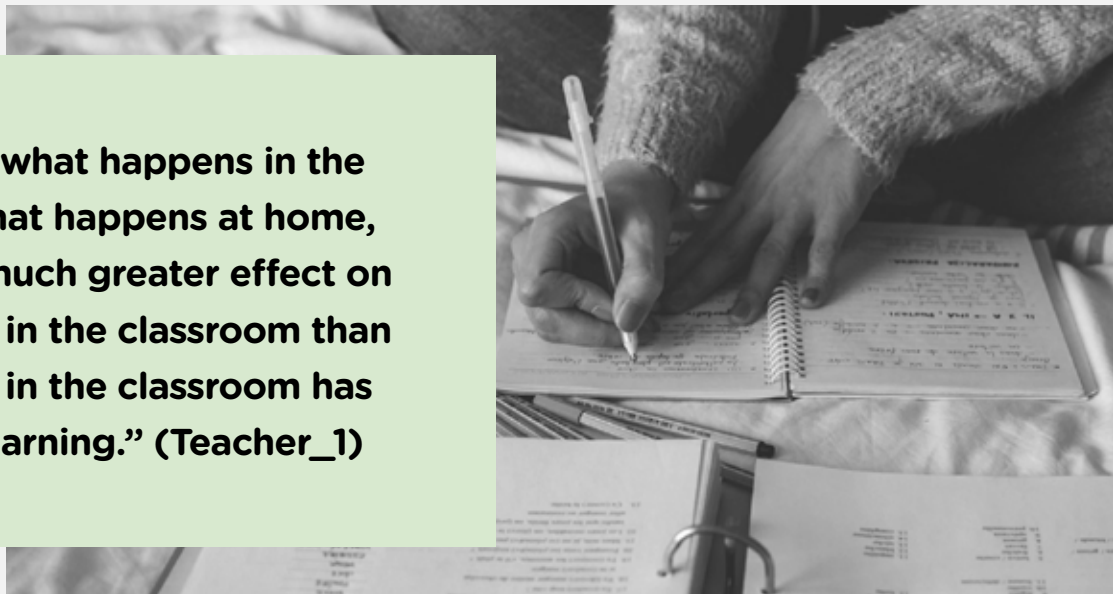
v. Students' ownership of their learning

According to the teachers interviewed, involving students in the learning process can enrich their engagement experience because it presents them with *"the opportunity to give feedback to the teacher"* (Teacher_2). Through the adoption of a more interactive teaching method, students will have a space for participation where they can inform teachers of *"what will truly engage them"* (Teacher_5). These safe spaces assure students that *"they can voice their opinion, their opinion has value, it's being listened to and it can't be changed"* (Teacher_5). Increasing student awareness as to how their studies impact their future and help them succeed in their exam can influence student engagement. For instance, if a particular course is a prerequisite for the students' entry into higher education, they are more likely to be engaged in the learning process. Finding ways to link learning to aspects of students' interest and daily lives by making it *"meaningful for them"* (Teacher_17) tends to involve students in the learning process. There is also a call for more flexible syllabi that allow for activities that enhance student engagement and appreciate differences in learners, since *"students don't all have the same interests"* and should be given the opportunity *"to shine, to show their talents, and develop their talents, even find their talents* (Teacher_2).

vi. The teaching and learning process

Selecting teaching methods reflective of students' different learning styles can have a positive impact on engagement:

> **"In reality we know that there is a vast range of abilities and ways of learning. So a teacher is able to engage more with the students if she is able to identify these learning methods and manage to find ways of engaging each student in class." (Teacher_6)**
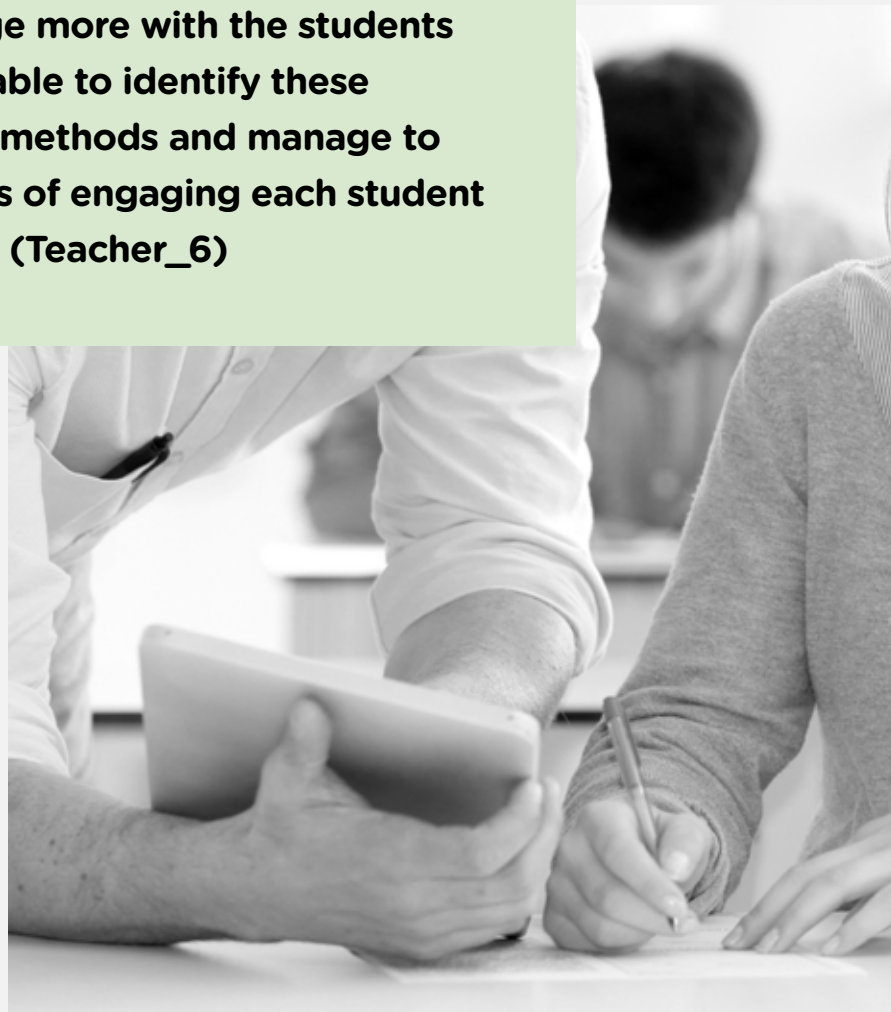
Technology, too, can bolster opportunities for engagement since *"the use of technology definitely helps engage them [the students], instead of having a teacher explain, the use of PowerPoint makes it easier to engage them"* (Teacher_8). Moreover, teachers stress the importance of using pedagogical methods that involve students, including engaging in *"dialogue, discussion, group work"* (Teacher_9). In so doing, teachers motivate students to think critically and not just memorize facts.

vii. Assessment methods

There are two opposing camps on the issue of assessment where on the one hand, there are teachers who feel that *"unless you give them [the students] a test or exam they wouldn't sit down and study those things"* (Teacher_17). On the other side of the spectrum are teachers who have consistently maintained that they do *"not think that students learn much from them [tests]"* (Teacher_25) due to their reliance on memorization. Some teachers recommend *"oral assessment … because the student has to really be prepared"* (Teacher_27), while others suggest that *"research or assignments and maybe presentation will be better"* (Teacher_25). A growing number of teachers seem to be in favour of continuous assessment *"especially for those students who are afraid of an exam or they don't do their best in an exam"* (Teacher_9). Alternative evaluation methods that take the emphasis away from summative assessment are also advocated:

> **"…participation, the tutorials and the lectures, handing work on time, doing the quality of the work, the depth, the past papers, the course work they are doing regularly and then you have the presentation as well." (Teacher_9)**

According to these teachers, students responded differently to diverse assessment methods which makes it all the more difficult to choose an ideal assessment method, particularly if the aim is to assess students' progress.

viii. Extracurricular activities

The interviewed teachers voice their support of student involvement in extracurricular activities. According to these teachers, extracurricular activities *"make students feel they belong to the school, and not merely somewhere that they go to for lessons, in out, in out, in out"* (Teacher_12), and enable teachers *"to build quite a rapport with our students"* (Teacher_37). Extracurricular activities *"keep them [the students] psychologically engaged"* (Teacher_28), offer students *"something to look forward"* to (Teacher_24), and *"help them get rid of their stress"* (Teacher_21). One of the interviewees, proclaimed that taking up extracurricular activities helps students *"in being responsible and taking commitments and trying to be involved, not just in your studies but also broaden your interests"* (Teacher_44). It also trains them *"to plan their time better, to organize their work, find a balance between studying and doing something else, and mix with other people"* (Teacher_44). While the majority of the interviewed teachers voiced support for the involvement of students in extracurricular activities, several had reservations as expressed by one particular teacher: *"we need to bear in mind and strike a balance with regards to the time we have for the subjects. You don't want to overdo one in favour of the other and vice-versa"* (Teacher_35).

6.3. Administration

i. The school environment

Similar to the responses received from students and teachers, administrators also felt that the school environment plays a principal role in fostering student engagement. As one administrator put it, *"if a student is comfortable at school then that will mean better participation in their engagement and a better two years of academic life"* (Ad_11). Administrators agree that a physically welcoming and aesthetically pleasing environment will keep students interested and engaged in the school. Administrators support embracing an empathetic and inclusive leadership approach which gives voice to students and teachers alike. For the administrators to be approachable, they need *"to show students that we're on their side, so it has to be a democratic approach"* (Ad_10). The impact of a strong and inclusive leadership style is among other influential factors referenced by administrators:

"It has to be strong leadership, first of all. It has to be clear in direction, and then at the same time it has to be a type of leadership which encourages shared leadership...
We need to engage the teachers first because they are the main link with students and then this leadership can be passed on to students themselves and they become leaders." (Ad_7)

While some administrators seek to encourage students in an effort to inspire engagement, others focus on the prominence of the class itself including environmental factors such as classroom size.

ii. Students' socio-emotional wellbeing

Advancing a constructive relationship among students and teachers coupled with a comfortable school environment are stated as important factors contributing to the students' socio-emotional wellbeing. Administrators continuously stress the value of generating a sense of belonging to the school:

> **"...involving the students and making them feel like they're part of a family. (...) we know their names ... most of them at least. I think it does make a difference feeling that ... that you belong to something." (Ad_15)**

In a similar vein, teachers are encouraged to approach administrators and inform them about students with personal problems in an effort to pull in all resources to help the individuals in need. Accordingly, it is important to *"engage with those students on a personal level and letting them know that we care for them as a person"* (Ad_2). Administrators hold teachers accountable for problems that may arise in learning contexts, in light of the fact that they are viewed as role models by students. Ultimately, fostering a sense of belonging by personalizing the school experience, coupled with investment on the part of teachers and the administrative staff, is deemed as central to student's socio-emotional wellbeing.

iii. Student dependent factors

The majority of the administrators interviewed maintain that when it comes to engagement, students bear the ultimate responsibility aside from home life and school environment. Administrators believe that schools generally provide sufficient resources for students and it is ultimately up to the student to engage and contribute. The students' family is referenced as a contributing factor in that a secure and healthy home life gives students the space they need to expand academically and emotionally:
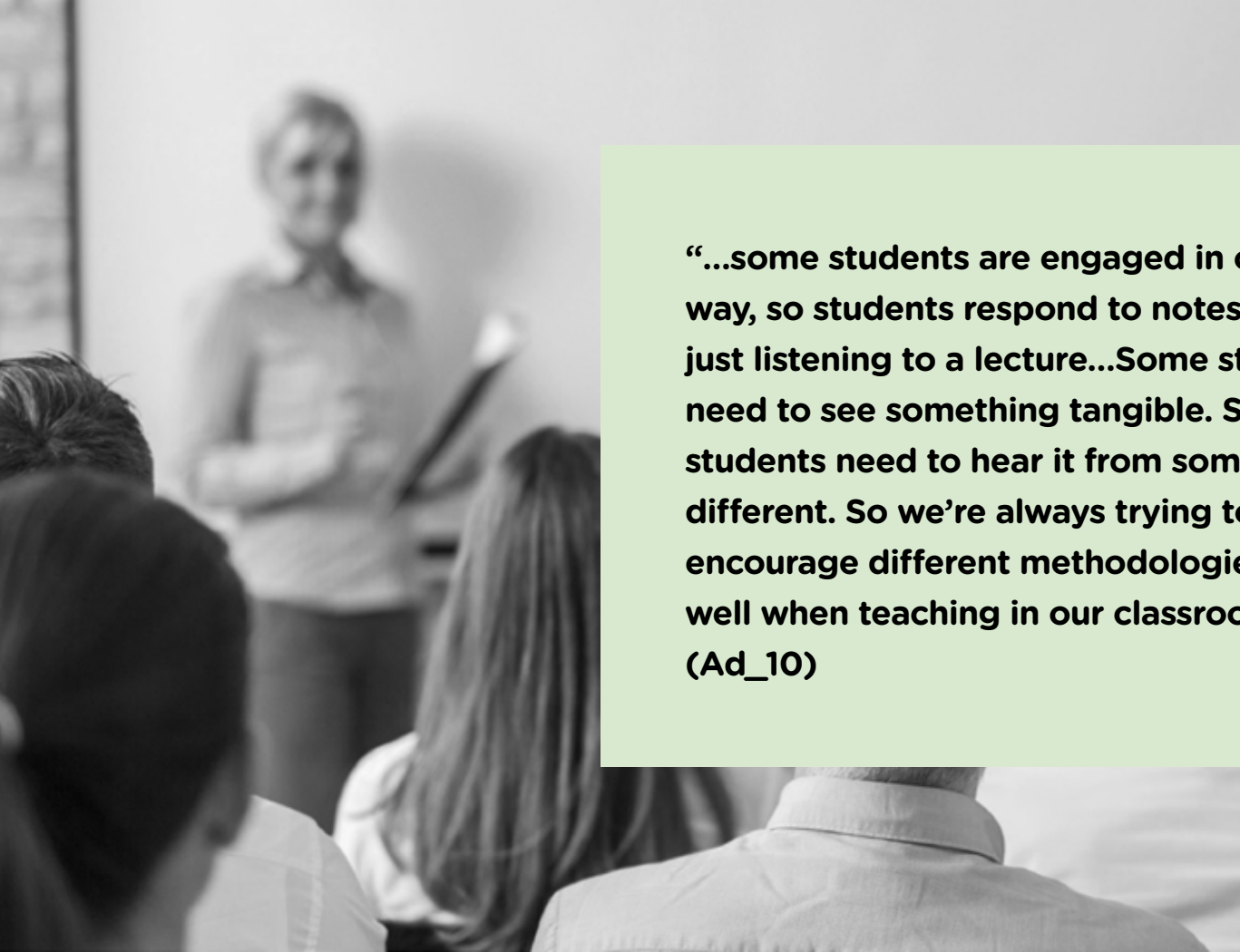
"I think primarily they need the family environment. If the family environment is sound, secure then they have the time and energy to expand, they also need to be healthy, mentally and physically." (Ad_7)

Students' inner motivation and personal drive is always considered a priority: *"if it doesn't come from within then whatever the parents or the teachers do, it's useless"* (Ad_5).

iv. The teaching and learning process

Administrators have confidence that in order to establish a teaching and learning environment that is engaging, teachers need to take students' different learning styles into consideration:

"...some students are engaged in one way, so students respond to notes and just listening to a lecture...Some students need to see something tangible. Some students need to hear it from someone different. So we're always trying to encourage different methodologies as well when teaching in our classrooms." (Ad_10)

Aside from taking students' different learning abilities into account, administrators argue that the pedagogical approaches implemented should be responsive to change and constantly updated. The majority of the respondents underscore teachers' responsibility to go the extra mile and cultivate a strong relationship with the students in an effort to enhance engagement. Consequently, teachers must not only be experts in their fields of study but also intuitive toward student needs and wants. Demonstrating to students how the knowledge they acquire in class is relevant to their lives is imperative to enriching the engagement experience. Accordingly, *"you cannot really force anybody to do anything... this aspect of relevance is very important. Students do not engage if they don't find it relevant"* (Ad_6). Bearing these in mind, administrators make the case that teachers should be persuaded to review their pedagogical approaches and subsequently be supported by the school administration.

v. Assessment methods

Administrators hold that by solely focusing on preparing students for exams, the progress made throughout the academic year is overlooked. Hence, exam results may not be an accurate reflection of the students' achievements. According to administrators, continuous assessment can have a positive impact on student engagement and may be better suited to evaluate student skills in comparison to summative standardized tests:

"We have to have an environment that fosters inquiry, right? Where students are not being told 'This is what you're going to reproduce on the exam. We're going to use the exact same standard for every student and success is going to look the same for everyone.' That's not an environment where a student can engage." (Ad_2)

vi. Extracurricular activities

Administrators have identified several advantages to participating in extracurricular activities, including acknowledging different dimensions of one's capabilities. The newfound awareness through engagement in extracurricular activities *"gives some people confidence … some people are weak academically but they're very good in sports or in drama or in something else"* (Ad_1). As stated by one administrator, by becoming aware of their competencies and gaining confidence, *"sometimes it affects their choices in the future"* (Ad_1). Nevertheless, these benefits cannot be attained if the school does not provide the necessary conditions for students to participate in extracurricular activities. This can be accomplished with help of administrators who are supportive of such practices and do not create barriers to student participation.

chapter 7
conditions hindering student engagement

key findings

The reasons why students disengage:

- Previous school experience, lack of support, boredom, ineffective teaching methods, dislike toward subject or teacher, excessive workload and difficulty level, wrong subject choice and low academic performance.
- Student-related factors include non-commitment, immaturity and lack of discipline.
- External factors consist of financial issues, peer pressure and family mind-set.
- Students' failure to see the relevance of their studies to their lives as well as feeling forced to study certain subjects.

The school environment:

- Disruptive environment is linked to lack of discipline among students' inside the classroom as well as distractions in the school environment.
- Large class sizes restrict the extent of attention teachers can offer students, decrease student confidence and prevent learners from developing close relationships with their peers.
- The school's physical environment including shortage of air conditioners, proximity from place of residence, limited school facilities and lack of space for students to spend their free time negatively impacts engagement.
- A general top-down school atmosphere with closed-door policies and limited or non-existent personal involvement in students' lives on the part of the administration also hinders engagement.

School related issues:

- School policies that are deemed as unjust, extremely lenient, or excessively rigid.
- Absenteeism due to scheduling conflicts with long gaps between lessons.

Students' social-emotional wellbeing:

- A competitive environment, absence of social networks, peer pressure and students who lack a sense of belonging to the school.
- Lack of communication between students, teachers and the administrative staff.

Student dependent factors:

- Student personality traits such as fear of failure, low self-confidence and inability to cope with the pressure and workload of school.
- Wrong subject choice stemming from lack of guidance or parental pressure.
- Problems associated with being young adults and family backgrounds.
- Use of disengagement as an expression of defiance and rebellion.

Students' lack of ownership of their learning:

- Absence of free choice in choosing subjects as well as limited information and guidance.
- Perceived unfair treatment, no second chances in case of failure and time constraints that limit participation in class.

The teaching and learning process:

- Teachers are key elements in the learning and teaching process; teaching skills, personal attitude, lesson planning, fair treatment of students, teaching methods and pedagogical approaches influence engagement on the one hand and pique student interest in the subject on the other.
- Heavy workload in the limited time available and the pressure to complete the syllabus have a deleterious effect on the teaching and learning process.

Assessment methods:

- The result-oriented system that is heavily reliant on exams places unwarranted pressure on learners and disregards the students' holistic learning experiences.

Extracurricular activities:

- Students are either unaware of available activities or restricted by the few available choices.
- Student difficulty in managing extracurricular activities and academic aspects of their school life.
- Absence of support and lack of encouragement to participate in extracurricular activities because of their perceived function as distracting students from studying and learning.

6.1. Students

i. The reasons why students disengage

Students who are disengaged feel lost and unable to develop a sense of belonging to the school. One of the central reasons behind student disengagement is a lack of support by the school staff: *"if you see the teachers not caring why should you care?"* (Student_43). The system's inability to take into account students' specific needs leads to their disengagement. This is highlighted by a student who states, *"If you just do the same [thing] for everyone, if you do not understand the problems they are facing, it's never going to better the learning experience"* (Student_10). Students also claim that they get 'bored' (Student_28) due to ineffective or non-stimulating teaching methods and consequently become disengaged.

Wrong subject choice is cited as another reason behind student disengagement: *"find[ing] that the subject isn't interesting or it's too easy, or else if they're not understanding the subject"* (Student_17). According to the students interviewed, dislike of the teacher or the subject is among a myriad of reasons Sixth Form students do not meet their expectations and end up feeling being disengaged in class. Lack of motivation due to an obligation to select a particular subject towards which students, *"might not have a real incentive, a real reason to study"* (Student_23) is another deterrent to engagement. It is essential for students to know the relevance of their studies to their lives and once that connection is lost, it inadvertently leads to disengagement. According to one student, *"at times it felt like I just need this to pass an exam that I knew had no relevance to an application to me as a person in my own interest"* (Student_29). Additional reasons identified that have a bearing on student's perception of learning and engagement include long breaks between lessons, peer pressure, personal issues, the inability to cope with the level of difficulty, wide spectrum of subjects, and students' past school experience.

ii. The school environment

School environment including classroom settings have been described as a major source of disengagement among learners. In this respect, one student argues, *"in class, a lot of the times, people want to engage. As in they want to ask questions, they want to discuss, but they're not given the opportunity I feel"* (Student_23). Distractions caused by some students' disruptive behaviour inside the classroom or the surrounding school environment also hampers learners' desire to be actively involved in the learning process. The relationship between student engagement and learning environments including the importance of aesthetically appealing learning spaces are also mentioned. Hence, *"environments that make you very sleepy and like neither the teacher nor the student feels like learning let alone participating"* (Student_7) are seen as part of the problem.

Respondents drew attention to the school's failure to create inviting and stimulating learning environments as existing communal spaces and classrooms were unkempt, rundown, or unsafe. Other problems include long commutes from home to school, inaccessible or inadequate school facilities and services, lack of distinct non-classroom spaces where students can spend their free time including hallways, cafeterias and outside areas, as well as ill-equipped or non-existent sports facilities. Class size can play a crucial role in the level of engagement because in large classes students are more likely to encounter disruptions and less likely to receive sufficient attention from the teacher. There is also the issue surrounding students' fear of being judged: *"you feel like you have to hold back because there are many people and you feel shy asking questions because you know people might judge you"* (Student_62).

iii. School related issues

Additional conditions dissuading student engagement include scheduling lectures where long gaps exist between lessons waste students' time and lead to absenteeism. According to one student, *"They have too many free periods and, for example, they have a lesson at 9 and then at 5. I personally wouldn't go to the lesson at 5 for example"* (Student_55). Students also blame unreasonable and unjust policies and school regulations for learner disengagement. The students interviewed particularly discuss school policies related to attendance that compel students to focus less on *"actually learning, [but put] more of a focus on getting to my lecture on time"* (Student_ 29). For instance, one of the respondents asserts, *"There were some lectures, (…) that I did not particularly like. I used to go just for the attendance"* (Student_1).

iv. Students' social-emotional wellbeing

The absence of any sense of belonging or feeling of attachment to the school keeps students at bay to such an extent that they refuse to integrate or take part in activities organized by the school. The feeling of loneliness, weak network of friends and a competitive environment are among other causes of student disengagement during Sixth Form. Some students complain that continuously changing lectures affords them little time and opportunity to make friends. Respondents allude to the difficulties brought on by peer pressure as well as a lack of communication among students, the administrative staff and teachers. Some students deliberate on the lack of support and guidance on the part of the administrative staff where, for instance, *"You won't really feel … loved by the school kind of thing. It's like, you literally feel like a number* (Student_11).

This is while other students feel immense pressure by the school's high expectations. In fact, one student argues, *"The school is constantly reminding you of past people that came to the school and how well they did and how prestigious they are"* (Student_30). The same student claims that she feels pressure to follow a particular career path since,
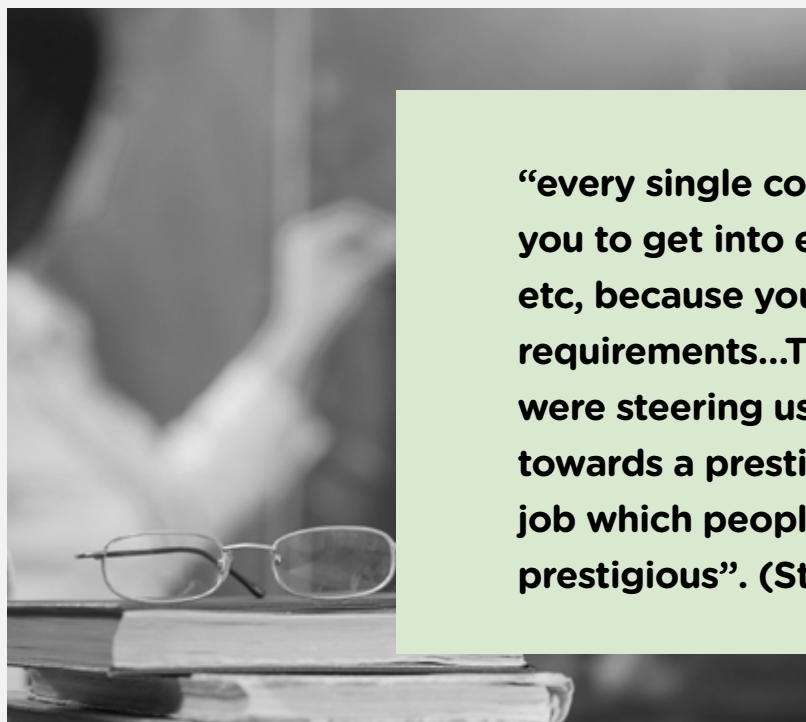
"every single course was preparing you to get into either law, medicine, etc, because you would fit into those requirements...They [the teachers] were steering us towards that path … towards a prestigious sort of job, or a job which people would consider to be prestigious". (Student_30)

v. Student dependent factors

Among the elements identified as impediments to student engagement, aspects related to students' personality top the list. One component is anxiety of failure and fear of the unknown since *"fear hinders them [students] from even exploring more"* (Student_56). Low self-confidence, self-doubt, appearing weak under pressure, inability to cope with the level of difficulty and heavy course load are among other deterrents of engagement. Students also brought up particular age-related difficulties they face as young adults because, *"I think that in the age between 16 and 18, there are a lot of things that happen in a student's life (…)*(Student_30). The uncertainties and pressures facing these individuals have been well documented:
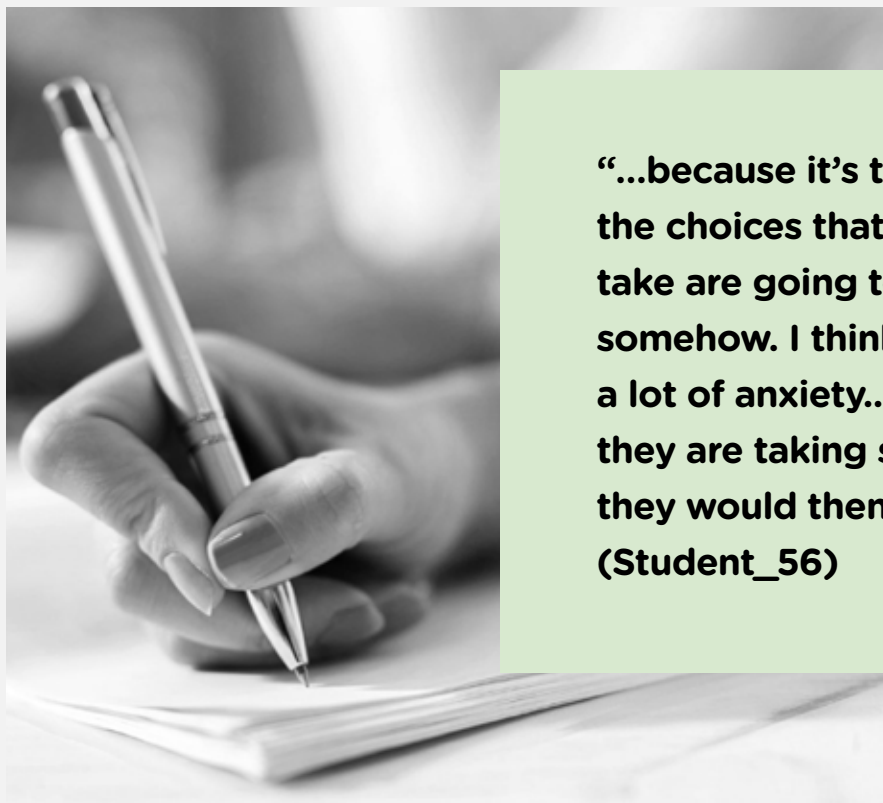
"…because it's the time where the choices that they are going to take are going to affect their lives somehow. I think that creates a lot of anxiety…especially if they are taking something new they would then get anxious".
(Student_56)

Students denote that undue pressure from outside sources including parents can push them to select subjects that are ultimately wrong for them. One student captures these struggles by stating that, *"basically the experience academically made me miserable because I was not studying subjects I enjoyed but subjects which I felt like I had to take… I ended up struggling with, for example, pure maths and my struggle with this subject impacted upon my entire learning experience"* (Student_ 29). In addition, students' lack of interest and motivation factor in to their unwillingness to be engaged. As such, one student states, *"if they started the Sixth Form without motivation they are not going to get more motivation from the assessment… They are not going to be looking forward to moving forward in their education* (Student_56).

vi. Students' non-ownership of their learning

Students discussed several conditions that discourage them from taking an active role in their own learning. In some cases, students reported being treated as immature individuals which contributed to their negative feelings. Another factor is related to subjects and learning institutions not meeting students' expectations (Student_4). The fact that many aspects of Sixth Form are compulsory and do not allow for students' free choice only adds to the learners' discontent and sense of non-ownership. As stated by one student, *"I barely attended tutorials and rarely did the work which I had to do [in a particular subject]. It was like the concept of this is forced"* (Student_ 29).
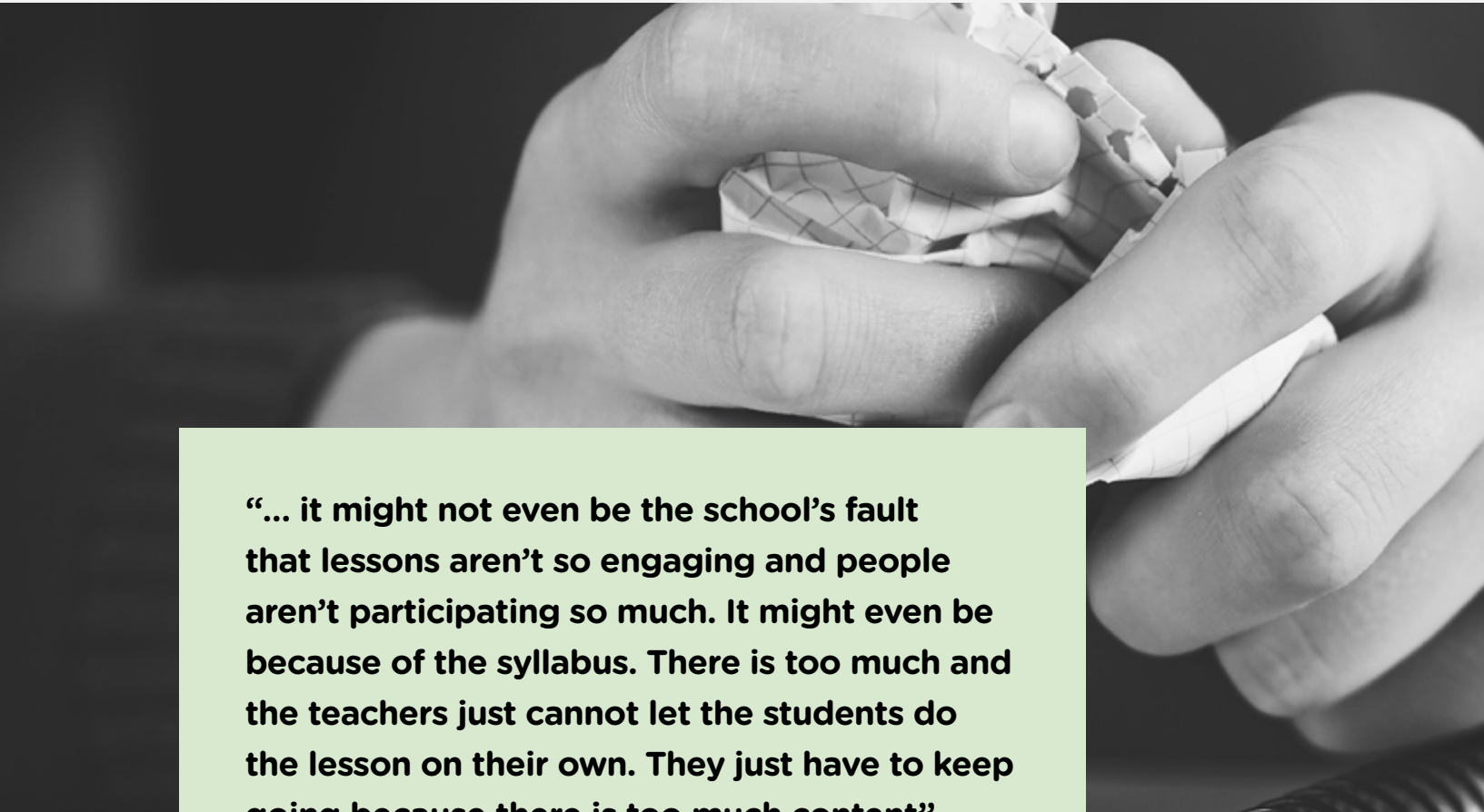
The education system's concentration on exams and restrictions in choosing courses that students consider irrelevant to their future makes students feel that they need to *"pass an exam you know there is no relevance to an application to me as a person in my own interest"* (Student_ 29). This was particularly true in the case of entry requirement courses which added to the feeling that the Sixth Forms system is *"inflexible in the sense that you can't choose certain subjects in combination with others"* (Student_62) and he felt that if it were not so *"I would have chosen another subject which I would have probably found to be more interesting for myself"* (Student_62). The courses ultimately chosen by the students cover such a wide array of subjects that it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on a particular course students consider relevant to their future.

Students criticize the school's strict guidelines and regulations including the fact that they only have one chance to pass the course which adds to the pressure on them. The respondents underscore issues related to time constraint especially regarding the limited number of lectures in certain subjects which affords them few opportunities to take ownership of their own learning and be fully engaged in class. In addition to the time limits that discourage student engagement, learners are faced with heavy workloads. As one student notes, *"they have a very hectic schedule...Then, sometimes it gets to the point [where] you get stressed because you can't do it"* (Student_10). Some of the students object to the insufficient time to prepare for examinations which forces them to *"learn a lot of new things in just one month. Like just too much information, which I could probably have benefited more from had it been spread over longer period of time and maybe get a better grade"* (Student_15).

vii. The teaching and learning process

As mentioned previously in the section on school environment, students become disengaged from teaching and learning spaces, especially classroom settings. In this context, problems that arise entail other students' disruptive behaviour or feeling frustrated in a class of mixed ability where stronger students feel held back and weaker students believe they are being pressured. In line with these issues, one student claims, *"I found a bit hard to learn because (...) you are mixing with people who are not at your level of education"* (Student_41). The teachers' attitudes toward students such as biases or favouritism are among other factors that demotivate learners. The ensuing barrier between teachers and students and educators' lack of enthusiasm in encouraging students to engage makes learners *"feel like you are not part of a class... If you are not going to involve and make it interesting for everyone then the students are not going to be interested from the start"* (Student_56).

The direct link between the teachers' attitude and students' perception of the subject are evident in a number of the responses: *"if you see the teachers not caring why should you care… They give you the image that they're coming here because it's their job and because they earn money so they don't care"* (Student_43). Another element that impeded student engagement involves the teaching methods and pedagogical approaches adopted by the teachers. This becomes particularly problematic when teachers opt for the same method of teaching despite students' diverse needs and leaning abilities. A different critique levelled against teachers related to not taking the time to explain course projects students are expected to complete: *"[the teacher] doesn't explain it properly or doesn't have the time to explain it properly and expects you to do it anyway"* (Student_4). Rather than criticizing the teaching methods employed, it is the way teachers plan the lessons that can hinder engagement. Some of the students blame demanding syllabi and rigorous lesson plans for their disengagement. According to one student,

"… it might not even be the school's fault that lessons aren't so engaging and people aren't participating so much. It might even be because of the syllabus. There is too much and the teachers just cannot let the students do the lesson on their own. They just have to keep going because there is too much content".
(Student_31)

viii. Assessment methods

A number of the respondents claim that the assessment methods adopted prevent them from reaching their full potential. For some, the examination *"has nothing to do with learning it's just testing you on what you know without helping you learn"* (Student_7) and places excessive pressure that only leads to further student disengagement. The fact that a system focuses solely on examination and does not take into account the students' work throughout the year puts added pressure on the pupils. It also has a damaging impact on students' overall perception of Sixth Form as indicated by one respondent: *"I have quite a negative impression of Sixth Form. (...) it basically involved just memorizing everything by rote... There wasn't anything that would prove to be worthwhile to me later on in my life"* (Student 31). Additionally, several students objected to the lack of feedback they received from teachers which could have helped them improve their performance.

ix. Extracurricular activities

In relation to extracurricular activities, students address several factors that proved to be impediments to their engagement. These include making extracurricular activities compulsory, students' lack of awareness of the available programs, shortage of time that prevented students from taking part in such activities, scheduling conflicts, and absence of activities that complement students' particular interests: *"I wanted to do extracurricular activities which were sort of relevant to the career I wanted to go into and there wasn't anything* (Student_17). The students that did manage to engage in extracurricular activities encountered problems managing their academic life. Students were either forced to miss class in order to take part in these programs or compelled to quit the extracurricular activity: *"I dropped theory and violin because of school, because I had to have time to study"* (Student_34). In one instance, a student felt that *"because I was so focussed on studying I ended up disregarding these extracurricular activities"* (Student_18). Other issues include the costs associated with extracurricular activities, personality traits such as shyness and fear of showing off their talent, *"because they are scared other people may judge them"* (Student_32) and lack of support especially from their family.

7.2. Teachers

i. The reasons why students disengage

According to the teachers interviewed, students become disengaged because *"they do not know what they want"* (Teacher_25) or are unable to see the relevance of their studies to their lives. Some students have specific goals and aspirations that are not related to school while others are *"just choosing to not engage"* (Teacher_4). Disengagement may also be caused by students' inability to cope with the course's level of difficulty, heavy workload, and a demanding syllabus: *"The syllabus could be too heavy, lots of content in it and in a way disinteresting/boring material"* (Teacher_18). Wrong subject choice can lead to failure which inadvertently impacts the students' state of mind because it *"will affect them personally and they might think that they are not capable of moving on further in life"* (Teacher_11).

Students demonstrate disengaged behaviour because *"they find this freedom [at Sixth Form and] they start missing lectures and then they miss so much that they opt to give up"* (Teacher_25). Personality traits including students' level of maturity are considered important to the learners' level of engagement:
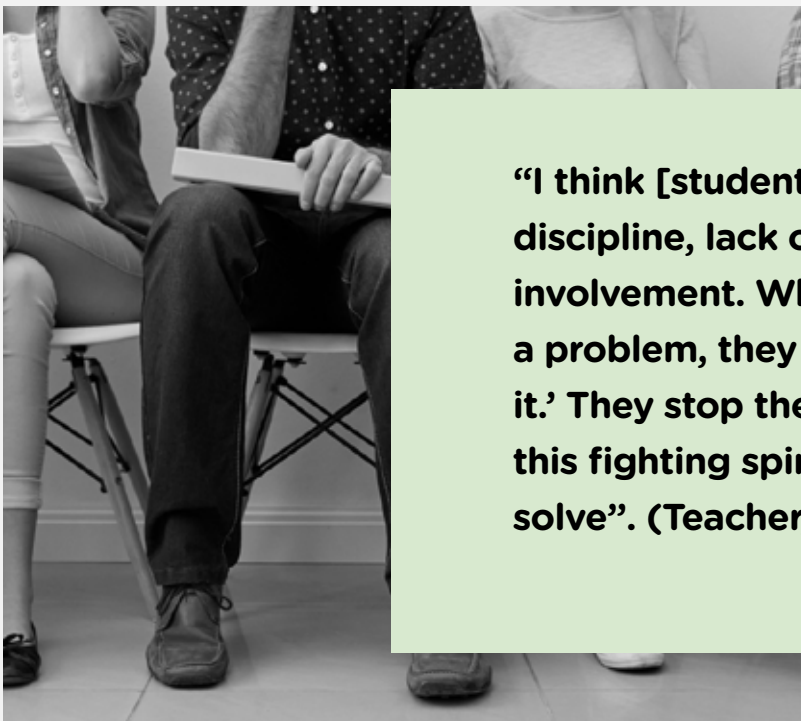
"I think [students have a] lack of discipline, lack of commitment, lack of involvement. When they are faced with a problem, they just say, 'I cannot do it.' They stop there. They do not have this fighting spirit to engage and try to solve". (Teacher_22)

Students become disengaged owing to external factors such as financial issues, peer and parental pressure and *"problems at home that affect them"* (Teacher_37).

ii. The school environment

The class setting and class size are regarded as defining factors in student engagement. According to the teachers interviewed, in large class settings, it is more difficult to establish a rapport with students, *"because you don't have one-to-one contact"* (Teacher_43) and *"it's very difficult to learn their names"* (Teacher_16). Moreover, teachers maintain that a large school setting can make the environment less conducive to engagement because it is much more difficult to be flexible and *"follow the students who are falling behind and who can be helped not to fall behind"* (Teacher_6). Some of the teachers reveal that they have difficulty giving lectures and engaging students due to a lack of resources and facilities. Teachers also mentioned the absence of adequate spaces where students can study and spend their free time.

iii. School related issues

Teachers identified a number of concerns related to administrative and systemic issues within the school including scheduling conflicts, financial issues, and school policies and regulations. For instance, the inconsistency in breaks between classes translated into timetables with *"a lot of consecutive lectures, no break between lessons. If you have to concentrate for such a long time, it's very difficult"* (Teacher_12). Meanwhile, there are students who *"will have 4 or 5 hours free and it is too long for the students so they do not go to the library to work and research and they waste all this time"* (Teacher_21) and at times even choose to not return to the class. Another drawback of such timetables is the difficulty students face in making friends or getting to know teachers outside class hours. Teachers also expressed concern about excessive bureaucratic policies and regulations that are *"not open to having students engage … that they're content with letting the students be passive"* (Teacher_20). In contrast, there are teachers who complain about lack of regulations and policies in dealing with problematic issues especially in relation to disruptive students. Strict attendance guidelines as well as policies which demand that students either pass a certain number of courses or they *"will not proceed to year two even though you got a good mark"* (Teacher_7) forces some students to repeat subjects they completed despite obtaining a satisfactory grade.

iv. Students' socio-emotional wellbeing

The teacher-student relationship appears to have a significant impact on student engagement. For instance, if a teacher is not approachable and *"If the students are afraid of the teacher…. you're not going to open your mouth"* (Teacher_3). Some of the teachers expressed concern about the lack of proper communication among the school administration, teaching staff, and different school departments. Aside from this, teachers also point to peer pressure as another problem that can hinder engagement. Some of the interviewed teachers claim that learners attending Sixth Form are deeply influenced by their *"group of friends who might be a bad influence"* (Teacher_8) and encourage them to waste time.

v. Student dependent factors

A number of teachers blame student attitudes including lack of motivation, passivity and inability to effectively manage time as major issues leading to disengagement. There are others, however, who stress that learners' inability to recognize the relevance of the knowledge acquired in class to their lives is a serious problem for the reason that *"they are studying it because it is a requirement not because they see the actual use* (Teacher_21). Students' reluctance to speak out and the *"lack of communication or the lack of interaction, is because they're just so shy that they cannot communicate immediately"* (Teacher_26). According to the interviewed teachers, other factors impacting student engagement are wrong subject choice, inability to make the best academic decisions mostly because *"they do not know what they are going to do as they are not ready to decide for the rest of their lives"* (Teacher_19). *A different issue pertains to the school system which pushes students to take a particular class because they "need this as an entry requirement"* (Teacher_17), irrespective of its relevance to the students' future or their interest in the course.

While a number of respondents expressed discontent with students' obsession with grades, others blamed parents for being fixated on grades which prevents learners from experiencing a holistic form of education. Personal problems, issues pertaining to mental health and family troubles where difference in education levels result in a *"clash (...) between the culture of the home and the culture of the school"* (Teacher 17) are attributed to students' growing disenchantment:

"Students who have a lot going on especially in their private life, as well, family intimacy with the boyfriend/girlfriend, there is sexual orientation as well. I have many students going through significant changes. These are all factors that can inhibit a student to continue or to focus." (Teacher_9)
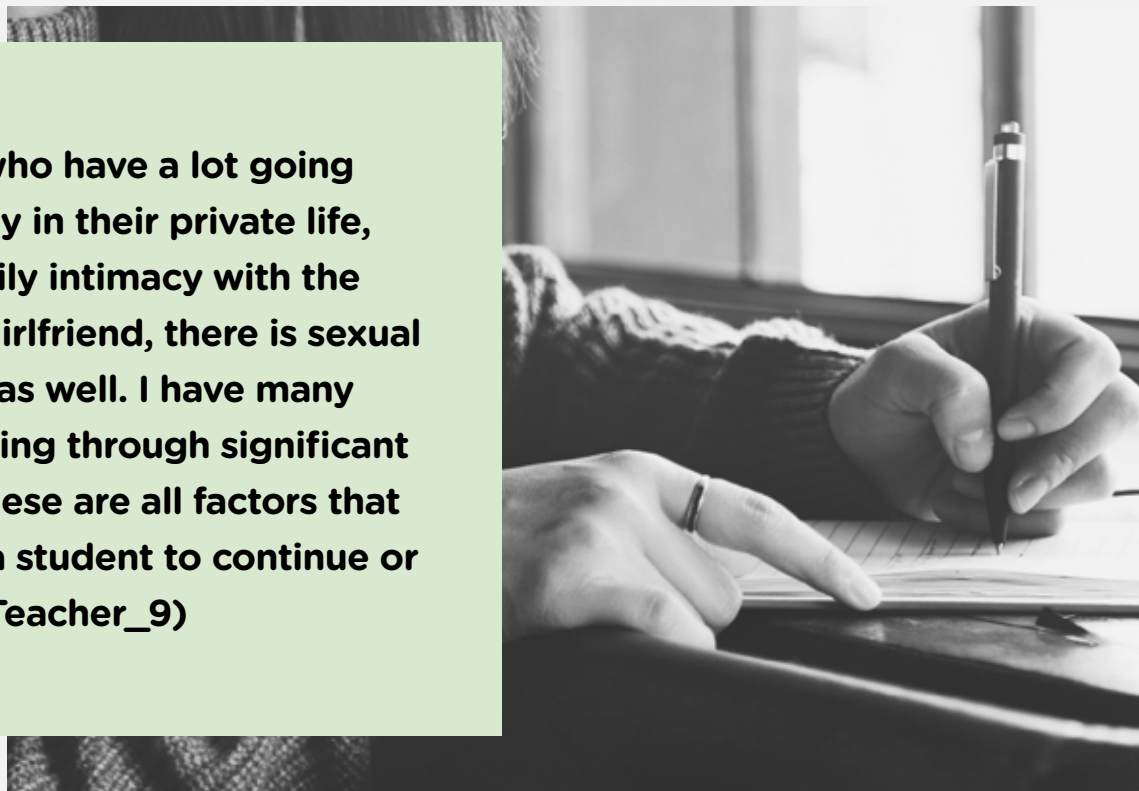
Although students coming from supportive families perform better than those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, there are students who succeed despite serious family problems: *"I have also come across students who come from broken families and whose lives are in a mess but who have something in them that pushes them to succeed"* (Teacher_8).

vi. The teaching and learning process

Teachers find the demanding syllabus and the course's heavy workload as central sources of disengagement among learners which explains why, *"students stop liking the subject and that is the reason why they don't continue studying because they fall behind"* (Teacher_21). The heavy workload not only affects students but teachers as well. According to one teacher, *"she needs time, she needs planning, and she needs support"* (Teacher_45), to be able to focus on student engagement. Teachers criticize *"the syllabi, [because] what we have to teach, are too heavy. They've got lots of content"* (Teacher_18). The pressure to cover a syllabus that contains *"too much material for 2 years"* (Teacher_27) -with certain parts of it considered to be highly irrelevant by the teacher- makes it difficult for educators to invest in student engagement. The problem is that, *"You're pressured because you would like to engage students more, you would like to discuss more, ask more questions, but then you have to finish the entire syllabus* (Teacher_44).

In dealing with mixed ability or homogeneous classes, teachers tend to encounter difficultly in tailoring their instruction and accommodating all students in their large multilevel classrooms. Teachers are adamant that students need to learn to engage in the early years of schooling: *"they have to start before Sixth form [to be used to engage] because we try here [at Sixth Form] to get them out of that mentality but sometimes it is very difficult* (Teacher_25). Students' reluctance to engage may be due to the teaching method and pedagogical approaches adopted by the teacher. The teachers' characteristics tend to have a direct impact on student engagement, and *"If the lecturer, or the teacher, is not enthusiastic about his or her subject then that will be conveyed to the students"* (Teacher_35). For instance, if a teacher *"is too critical, that discourages students and ultimately they will turn against her"* (Teacher_36). In contrast, when facing teachers who are characterized as excessively lenient, students *"feel that there are no standards to work. Anything they do is good enough for her, so they don't feel challenged. They don't try to improve themselves* (Teacher_36).

vii. Assessment methods

The current assessment methods prevalent across Sixth Forms invest heavily in examinations and are *"extremely short sighted and utilitarian"* (Teacher_20). A system that *"doesn't take into account the effort we do and the students do their own studying. I think it is detrimental to the holistic learning experience of students* (Teacher_14). Despite recommendations to adopt alternative forms of assessment, including continuous evaluation, one teacher points to a recurring problem that *"most of the people say they don't know the students enough so they can't give a mark overall"* (Teacher_11). Meanwhile, teachers' penchant to include citizenship education into the curriculum cannot be overlooked:

"I think we are educating and we are teaching them on the level of school and service, and they are well-prepared, but when it comes to dealing with other people, being educated, being a gentleman, or a good citizen or more I think in some areas we are failing this."
(Teacher_22)
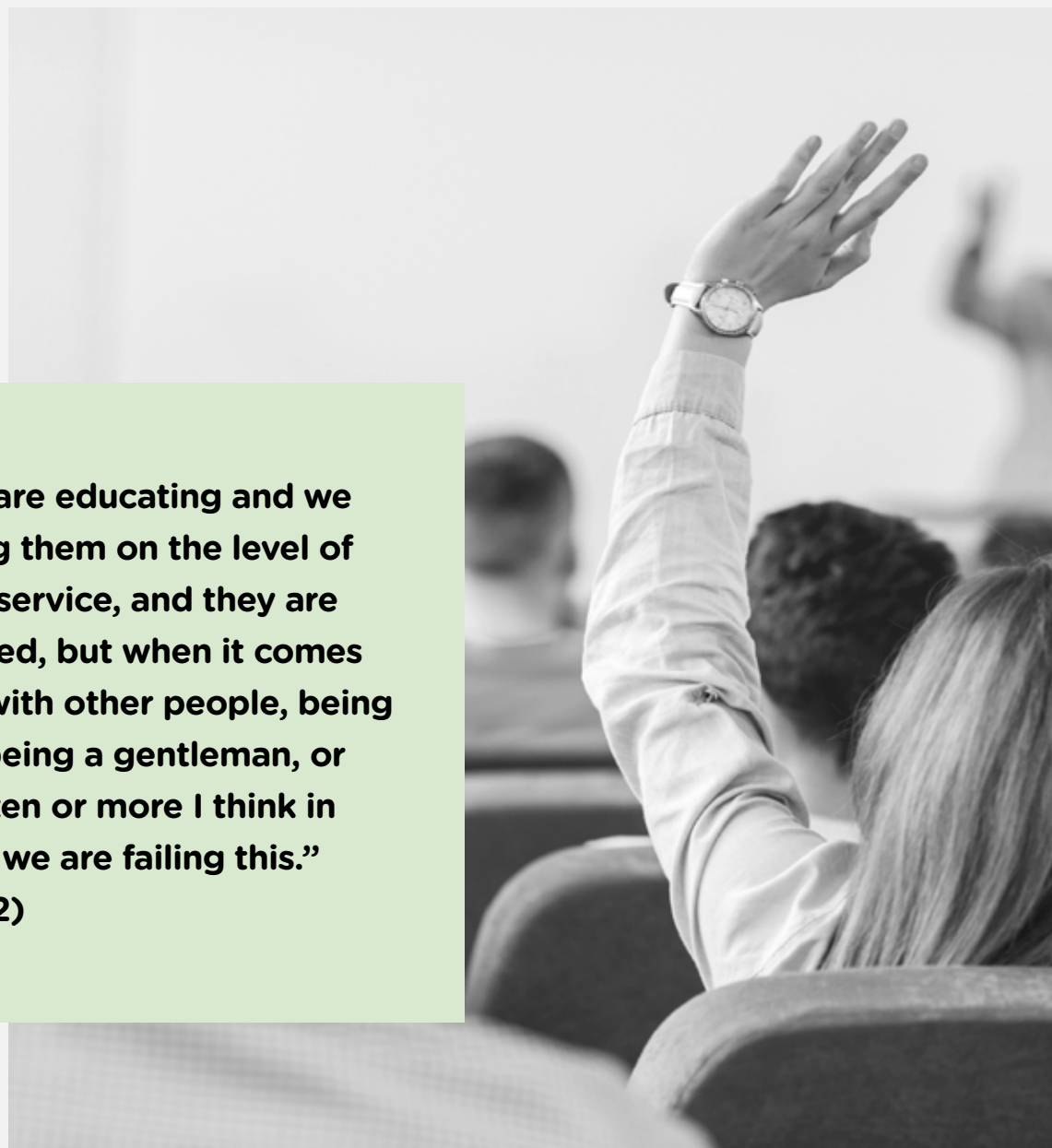
viii. Extracurricular activities

According to the interviewed teachers, different aspects related to extracurricular activities can impede student engagement: *"They [extracurricular activities] hinder students when they're not done properly [since] sometimes they won't have a direct educational link"* (Teacher_37). Teachers maintain that financial issues or time restrictions are possible causes that prevent students from engaging in extracurricular activities. As stated by one teacher,

"We have an educational system which makes it very difficult for students to actually partake in this [extracurricular activities]. I've seen so many cases of students who take part in extracurricular activities and it affects their academic life. (...). It's proving to be very difficult for them [to balance between extracurricular activities and academics]." (Teacher_23)
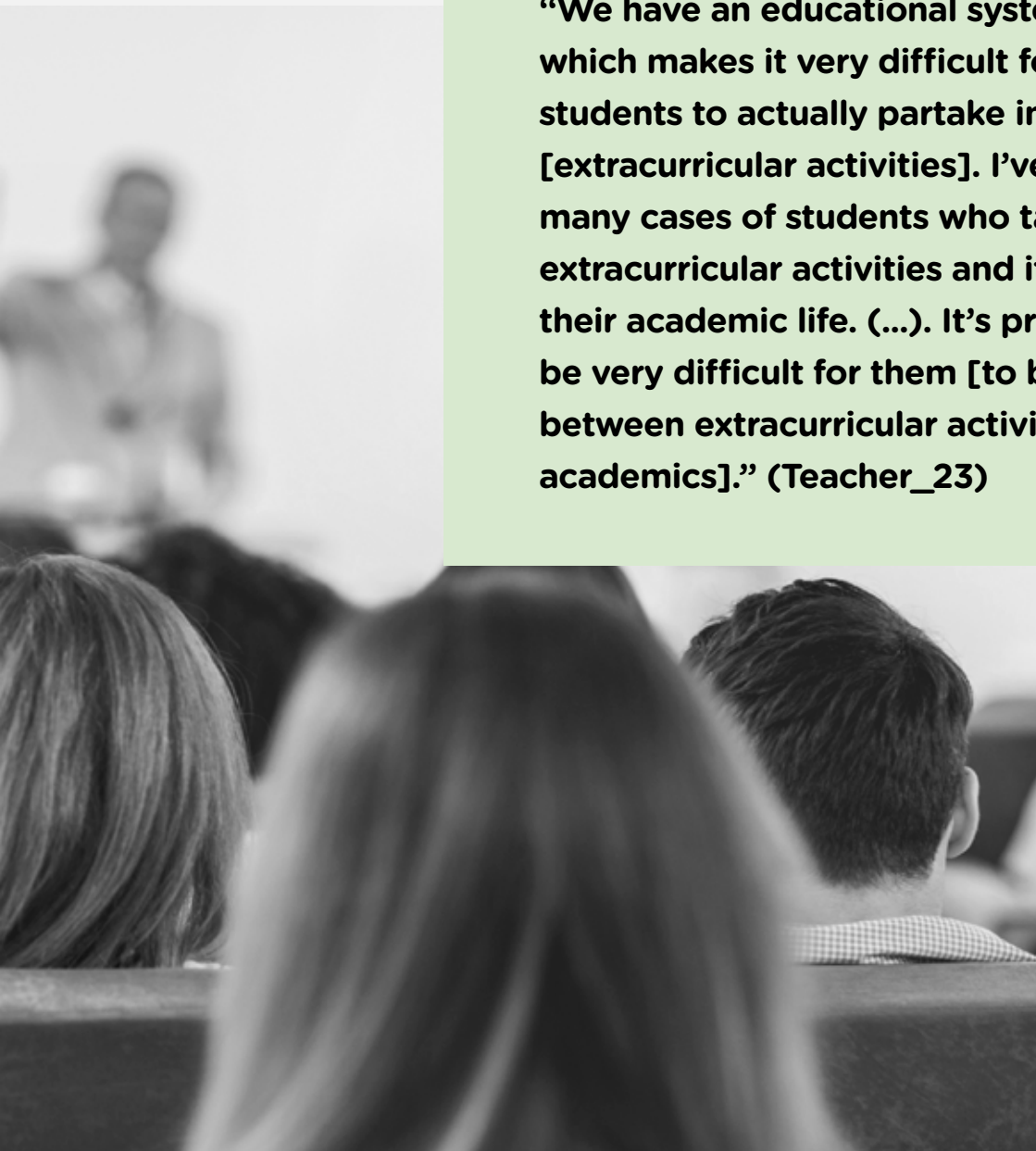
7.3. Administration

i. The school environment

A school's deteriorating condition due to lack of maintenance can hinder student engagement. Teachers and the administrative staff's limited support for students, "closed door" policies, the school attempts to impose one set of standard on all students, and teachers' reluctance to engage students are among other matters leading to disengagement. The fact that the administration does not become involved in addressing students' personal issues can only add to growing disenchantment among learners and lead to disengagement and a feeling of hopelessness and despair among troubled individuals. In cases where the administration takes initiative and becomes directly involved by helping to deal with the students' problems, learners exhibit far greater interest in engagement.

ii. School related issues

The administrators interviewed expressed their frustration over the excessive bureaucracy in the school system:

"The thing is what factors hinders a school?! Well it can be bureaucracy at higher levels. I want to introduce a new programme or I want to introduce a new system and I'm not given … I'm not given … attention or not allowed to develop my plans … [due to] bureaucracy." (Ad_11)

For administrators, problems reside in the school's deteriorating physical environment, lack of resources and a drive to stifle different initiatives. The majority of administrators support a balance between strong and empathetic leadership. Administrators cite the need for empathy in leadership, but are conservative in emphasizing that to maintain control, the leadership should not be too liberal: *"you can't be too lenient. You can't be too liberal, because then it becomes less… it becomes easy," Oh I'll do whatever I want!" So it has to be somewhere in the middle"* (Ad_10). One administrator, however, places greater emphasis on the notion of empathy in those responsible for leadership:
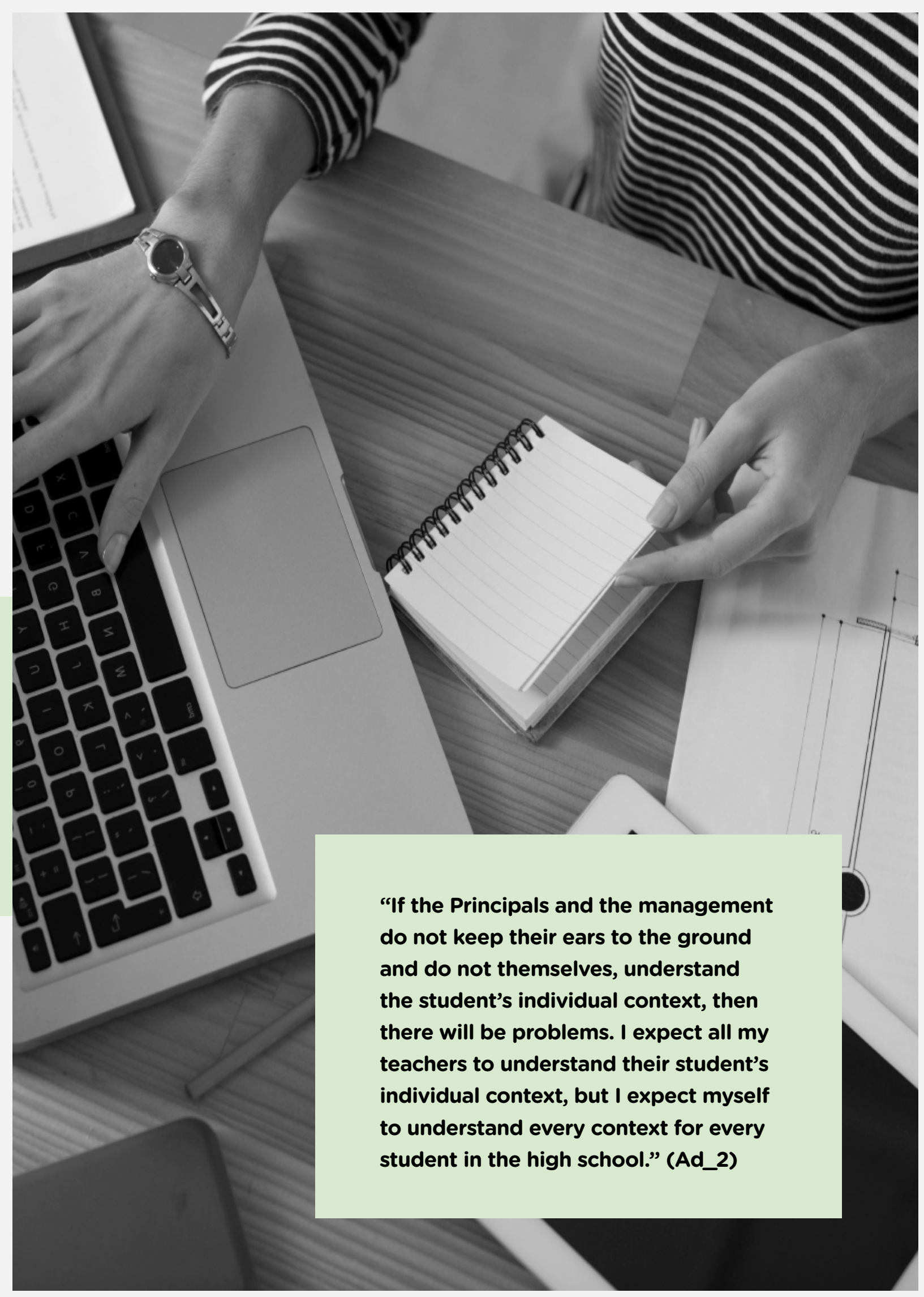
"If the Principals and the management do not keep their ears to the ground and do not themselves, understand the student's individual context, then there will be problems. I expect all my teachers to understand their student's individual context, but I expect myself to understand every context for every student in the high school." (Ad_2)

iii. Student dependent factors

Students' lack of commitment is considered as a condition that can get in the way of engagement. This lack of commitment, according to administrators, either stems from the inability to fulfil the requirements of a course or is a way for students to express their discontent: *"There are some initiatives that students don't take up and they are sending us a message by not taking up these activities. They want to express themselves"* (Ad_7). External factors believed to impact engagement include parental influence and wrong subject choice. In the view of one administrator, parents who do not exert meaningful influence over their children are in a way disregarding their children's need for guidance. Some of the administrators do, however, blame the students' general upbringing for their disengagement: *"They think they know what to do in life. And they obviously are unfortunately influenced by the media and everything, and their upbringing, prioritizes the wrong values and everything"* (Ad_12).

iv. Students' non-ownership of their learning

An important condition identified as an impediment to student engagement is an excessive focus on exams at the expense of students' intellectual development. Several administrators criticize the syllabus as a major deterrent to student engagement, believing that students *"are not getting a full education because they cannot because it is a race against time. They do not have time to think and take part"* (Ad_16). The 'obsession' with examinations is clearly exhibited in student behaviour where everything that is learned only makes sense in relation to the final exam. In this milieu, one of the administrators argues that,

"From when children are young, very young. Education should be an enjoyable experience. Now in Malta it's not. Or in most cases it's not, because we emphasize so much on home works and exams that … we destroy that idea of enjoyment."
(Ad_12)
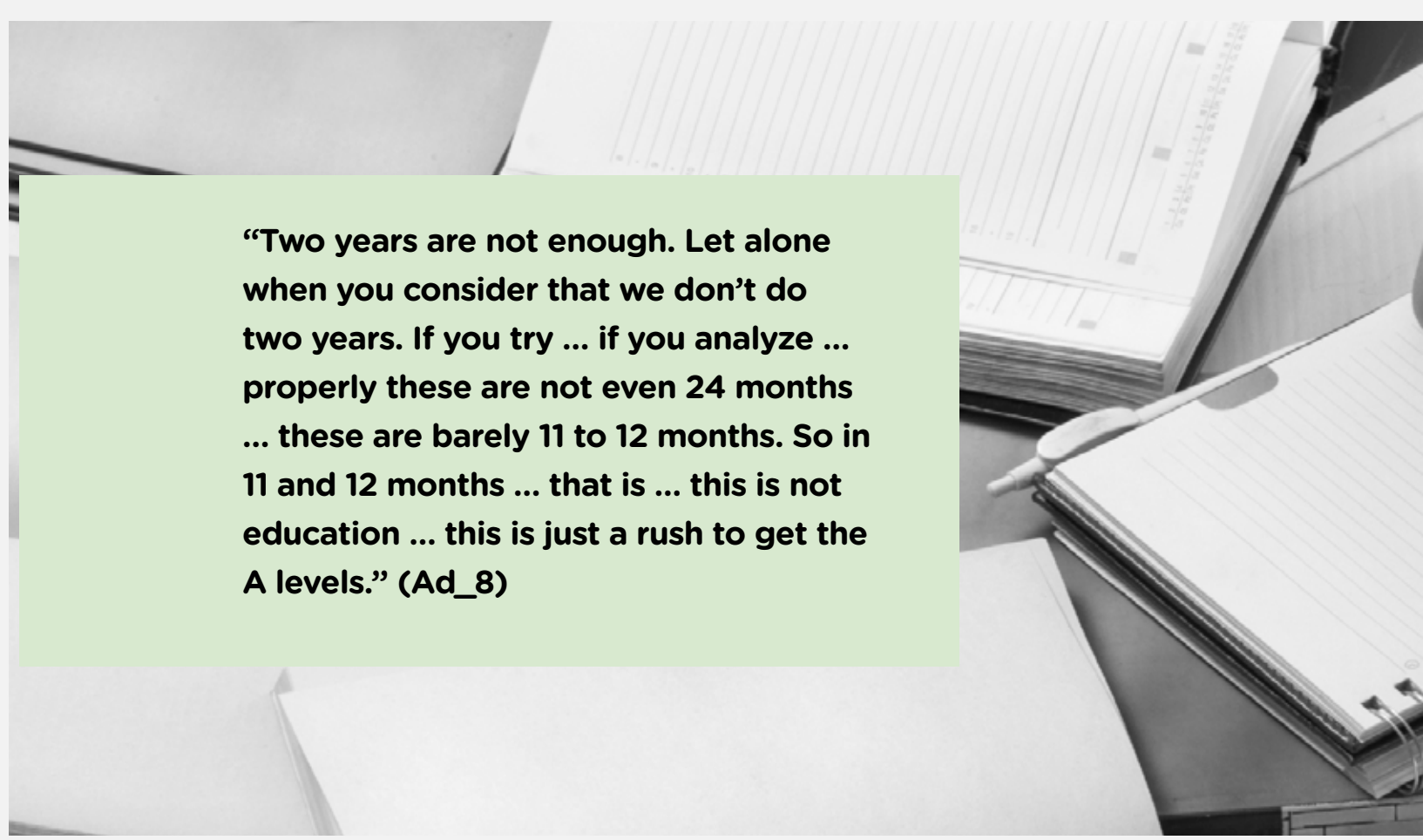
Another matter that seems to affect student engagement is a new initiative which allows students to sit in for the exams early, even during their first year at Sixth Form:

"... the possibility to allow students to sit for (...) [the final] exams already after the first year of Sixth Form was counterproductive, because just passing the exam is not enough! This encouraged cramming. These students generally disengaged from the subjects[if] they had already passed, in their second year of Sixth Form and were, thus missing out on knowledge that would be important for well-rounded intellectual development." (Ad_4)
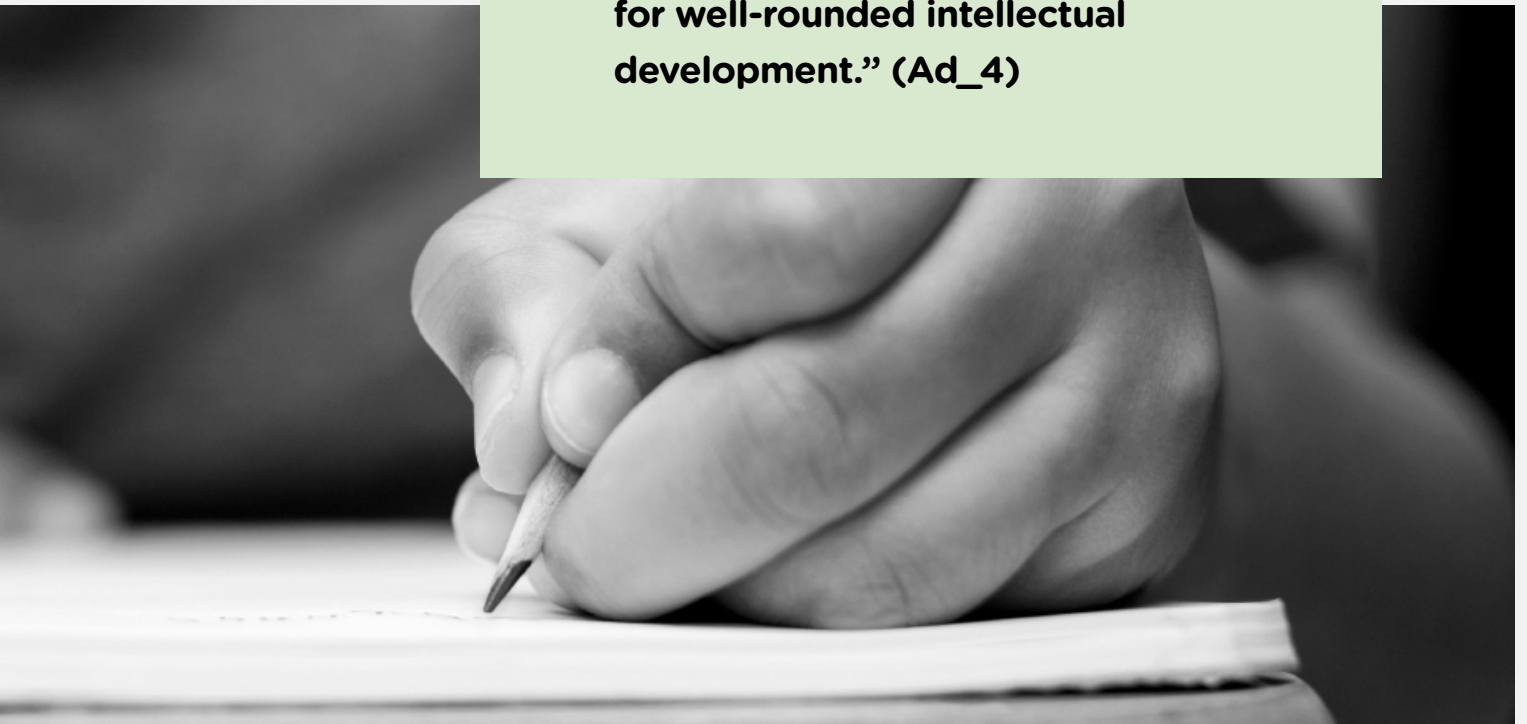
v. The teaching and learning process

Additional issues highlighted by administrators as imperative to increasing student engagement are greater creative control over the syllabus and addressing time constraints that leave little time for teachers to encourage participation. The excessive demands of the syllabus and time limitations are indicative of the fact that, *"most of us are not keeping up with the syllabus exactly or we have to decrease the amount of depth we do it in order to finish the syllabus and that is always a balancing act"* (Ad_5). One administrator underscored this point by stating that,
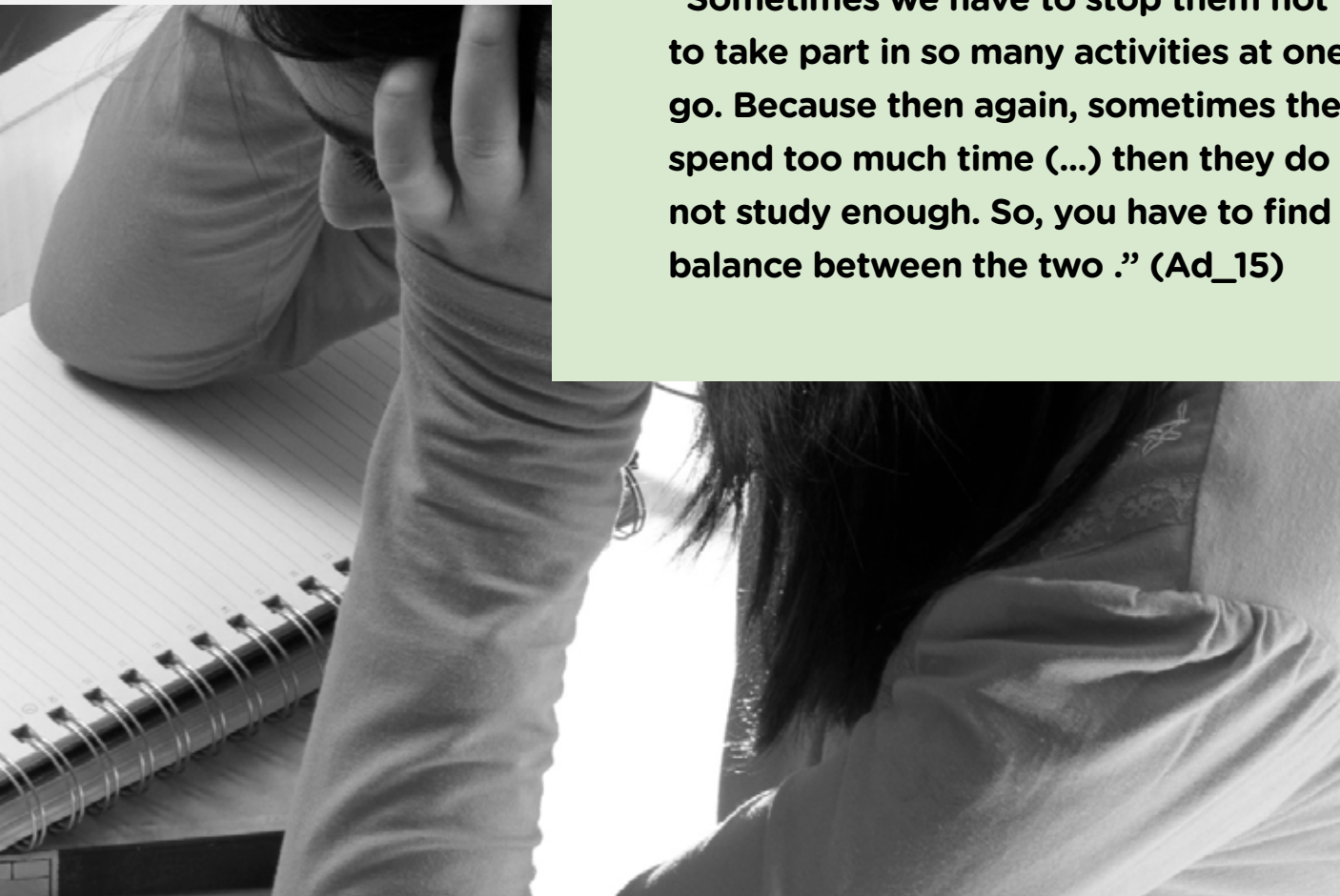
"Two years are not enough. Let alone when you consider that we don't do two years. If you try … if you analyze … properly these are not even 24 months … these are barely 11 to 12 months. So in 11 and 12 months … that is … this is not education … this is just a rush to get the A levels." (Ad_8)

Another issue that can limit student engagement involves teachers who are resistant to tailoring their teaching methods to the needs of students: *"occasionally you might have teachers who remain… in a certain traditional mode and sometimes students don't respond, sometimes they do. It depends on the teacher"* (Ad_10).

vi. Extracurricular activities

As stated by one of the administrators, *"sometimes they have so little time left because of their studies that even if they love to engage in extracurricular projects, they can't. Time does not permit"* (Ad_7). On the other hand,*students are not going to be interested from the start"* (Student_56).

"Sometimes we have to stop them not to take part in so many activities at one go. Because then again, sometimes they spend too much time (...) then they do not study enough. So, you have to find a balance between the two ." (Ad_15)

According to one administrator, *"Extracurricular activities take away from academic time from lesson time and studying time. So sometimes teachers complain that students have missed many lessons because of the different activities the students choose to undertake"* (Ad_10).

chapter 8
the relation between student engagement and continuation of studies

key findings

Choice of Sixth Form

- While for some students entering Sixth Form is viewed as a stepping stone to furthering their studies, others see it as a natural step to be taken after secondary school.
- Flexibility in choosing subjects, shorter school hours, smaller class sizes, familiarity with the
- institution and proximity to place of residence are viewed as important factors.

Transition to Further and Higher education

- The freedom and independence experienced during Sixth Form gives students a feeling of maturity and responsibility.
- The transition from secondary school to Sixth Form is described as abrupt and awkward.
- Students point to a huge gap between secondary education and Sixth Form especially in relation to workload and transition from single sex schools to mixed ones.
- Ill-prepared students find it all the more difficult to adapt to the new system.
- Students claim that their experiences in Sixth Form help them cope in Higher education, while others see no connection between the courses taken at university and Sixth Form.

The students' experience during their Sixth Form years

- The school environment, close ties to the staff, strong network of friends, personal development, self-discovery and gaining independence are just some of the positive experience of students at Sixth Form.
- Negative experiences are linked to a system that promotes memorization and rote learning and exerts undue stress on students over their academic accomplishments.

Students' perception on the relevance of Sixth Form

- Academically, Sixth Form is considered as a means to help students continue their education.
- Socially, it helps learners build their social skills and increases their confidence. Promoting extracurricular activities increases the social relevance of Sixth Form.

Factors encouraging students to continue to Further and Higher education

- Students with long-term plans who believe in the benefits of education for their career are more likely to continue their studies.
- Personal interest in a particular subject, self-fulfilment, ambition, support, external sources of encouragement and a love of learning compel students to further their studies.
- Results from examinations, previous school or work experience, and effective guidance have a positive influence.
- Promoting engagement from an early age is directly linked to students' decision to further their studies. Stipends are considered as effective incentives as well.

Reasons for students' discontinuation of studies

- Studies have been discontinued mostly due to entry into the labour market.
- Additional reasons behind students' decision to discontinue their education are homogeneous systems indifferent to the needs of diverse students, wrong subject choice stemming from inadequate guidance or parental pressure, heavy workload, poor school performance, personal problems, failure to find the relevance of their studies to real life, lack of ambition and short term plans.

8.1. Students

i. Choice of Sixth Form

For the majority of the respondents, Sixth Form is a stepping-stone toward the students' desired goals. For some, attending Sixth Form is inevitable, *"because I wanted to progress to university, I want to get, you know, a higher level of education and you know, I felt like it was the rational way to go"* (Student_18). The reputation of a school and the credibility of its teachers are a determining factor in students' choice of Sixth Form. For instance, Sixth Forms that house smaller class sizes are evidently more popular because, according to students, *"we are not a big number and they care about the students. On the other hand, the school reputation affects also their decision not to go to a particular school. There is more involvement, the classes are small"* (Student_56). Schools that are more flexible both in terms of their hours and *"choices of subjects in comparison to [other schools]* (Student_15) are preferred. A friendly and welcoming school atmosphere that puts students at ease while also preparing them for the transition from Further to Higher education is imperative. For the respondents, the experience of attending bigger and more challenging Sixth Form schools is valued as is being part of a strong network of friends and proximity of the school to their place of residence, parents, and guardians.

ii. Transition to Further Education

An important aspect of students' experiences at Sixth Form is the transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions. For some of the students, the freedom and independence experienced during Sixth Form is *"something that makes you grow, makes you more mature, think for yourself"* (Student_43). Students' experiences at Sixth Form enable them to take greater responsibility for their own learning and *"have a more focused idea about what you want to do"* (Student_34). The changes undergone by the students at Sixth Form are socially overwhelming at times. Accordingly, some students state that they experienced considerable difference between secondary and post-secondary systems. One of the points emphasized by the respondents relates to the importance of a gradual and smooth transition from secondary school to Sixth Form and from Sixth Form to Higher education. The drastically different pedagogical approaches at Sixth Form had an impact on how students engaged in the learning process:

"I mean you still need a certain amount of guidance from your lecture/ teacher because I mean you are fresh out of Secondary school you have no idea about anything, a limited idea of critical thinking, of personal research. I mean in Secondary school you are basically spoon-fed everything." (Student_49)

iii. The students' experience during their Sixth Form years

The responses received from the students interviewed reflect a generally positive experience at Sixth Form: *"I felt very at home there and it was very, very different to my secondary school, so I felt much better there"* (Student_30). Students identified several points that made their experience at Sixth Form a positive one including school environment, friendly staff, social networks, proficient lecturers, informative lessons and emotional as well as academic support. Students' increased independence brought on a greater sense of agency and responsibility both personally and academically. The respondents affirm that they decided to continue their education due to their positive experience at Sixth Form and because, according to one student, *"I discovered I had passions with certain subjects"* (Student_32). While the majority of the feedback received is positive, there are students who claim to not have had a pleasant experience. For instance, one student had *"quite a negative impression or experience in Sixth Form. I found that there was more of the academic focus than a learning focus"* (Student_31). The absence of critical pedagogical approaches and the emphasis on rote learning where *"there was more of memorizing like parrots... There wasn't anything that would prove to be worthwhile to me later on in my life"* (Student_31) are among the negative experiences of learners.

iv. Students' perception on the relevance of Sixth Form

The students interviewed reflected on the relevance of their Sixth Form experience in social and academic terms. As indicated, some students interpret relevance in academic terms where *"the whole point of Sixth Form [is] to get your A-levels"* (Student_7), learn to study more efficiently, and be prepared to enter university. For some students, the relevance of Sixth Form could be increased by *"making it more practical"* (Student_17), connecting the lessons to their lived experiences, *"learning modern things"* (Student_14), and by *"link[ing] it to tangible things we see"* (Student_16). In line with these assertions, one student attests, *"I had Marketing and it would have been nice if maybe we could have had a unit where we actually go and do an assignment related to a company in Marketing*" (Student_17). Students note that a diversified and interactive pedagogy in addition to the inclusion of alternative forms of assessment can be quite helpful. There were also references to the importance of *"sticking to [the] syllabus 100%"* (Student_5) and still allowing enough space for *"going and doing your own research"* (Student_49). In terms of social development, the students interviewed stressed that Sixth Form helps them build their confidence and social skills: *"I got to learn how to make, actually, new friends. I had to make an effort to go and talk to people, because I didn't know anyone"* (Student_33). One of the recommendations put forth by the interviewees is the need to increase awareness about the range of extracurricular activities available at Sixth Form.

vi. Transition into Higher Education

Students who have continued their studies were asked to reflect on their transition from Further to Higher education. For some of the students, the transition proved to be *"very shocking. I couldn't get used to it and it was very frustrating"* (Student_30) because they were not adequately prepared to deal with university. These sentiments were echoed by one of the interviewed students,

"I wanted to quit in the first semester that I was in university because it was very difficult for me. I got used to that system of being sheltered and having easy access to the administration and to the teachers." (Student_30)

Regarding the academic aspect, some students considered their studies at Sixth Form as *"a building block. The foundations, I mean they were the basis [for University]* (Student_23) while for others it proved to be a setback because *"there was no connection between my course and Sixth Form"* (Student_31).

vii. Reasons for students' discontinuation of studies

Regardless of whether students are ultimately planning to continue their studies, one of the central reasons behind their decision to quit their studies relates to financial issues. Students' entry into the labour market is cited as one reason: *"I had friends who were going to continue their post-secondary education, but stopped to get a job. But there is nothing in their future, it wasn't their dream job"* (Student_62). Financial difficulties also pushed students into an early start in the labour market: *"I wanted to [continue my studies] but I wasn't able to for financial purposes, financial reasons. But hopefully one day I will ..."* (Student_15). Wrong subject choice, the homogeneity of the school system, and a lack of awareness regarding students' diverse needs are described as factors that prevented students from continuing their education:
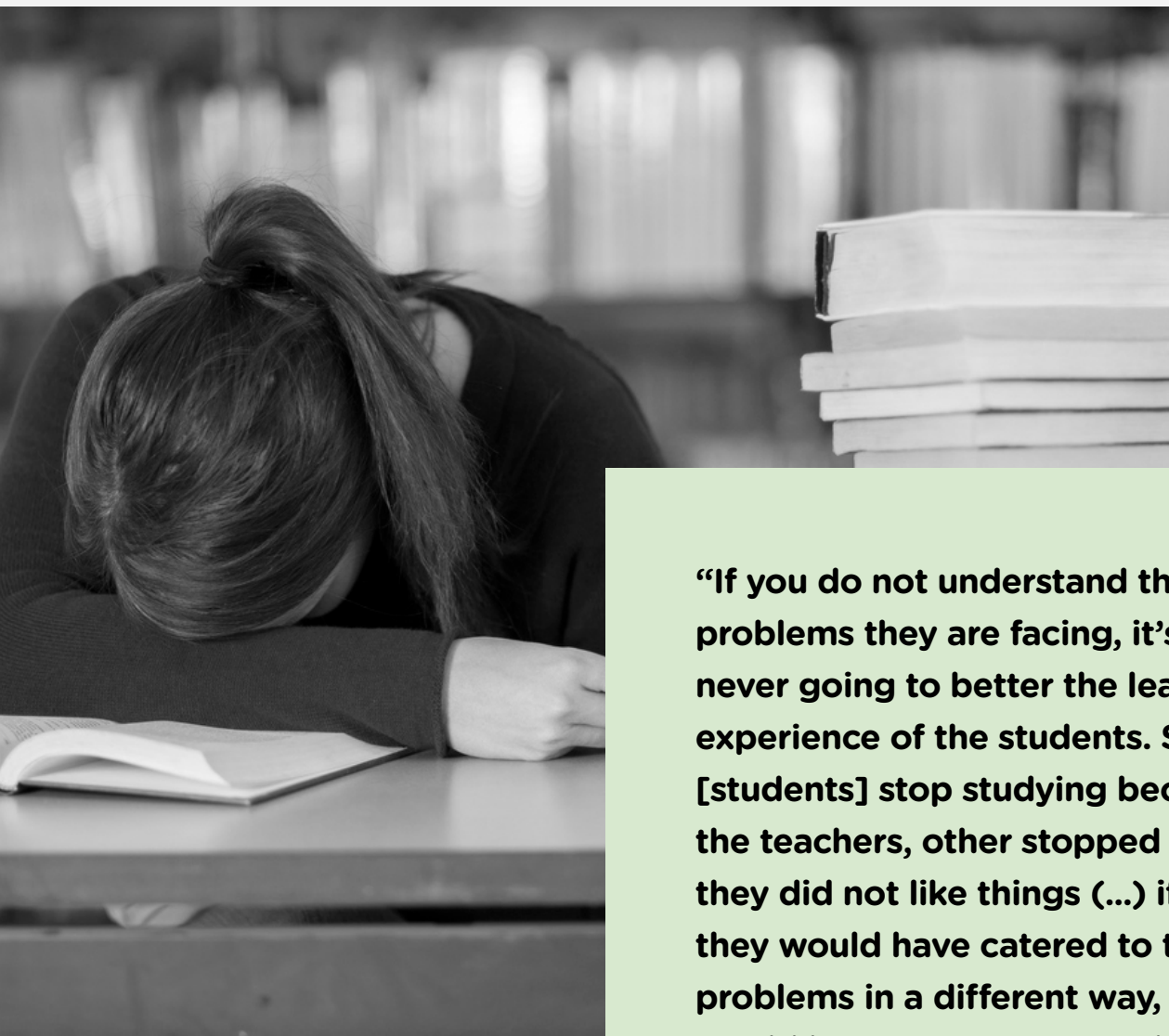
"If you do not understand the problems they are facing, it's never going to better the learning experience of the students. Some [students] stop studying because of the teachers, other stopped because they did not like things (...) if maybe they would have catered to their problems in a different way, they would have gone on." (Student_10)

8.2. Teachers

i. The students' transition to Further Education

Among the interviewed teachers, some assert that, *"between the O and the A level there's a world apart"* (Teacher_43). These teachers feel that even though they give students awareness of this gap, learners only realize its significance once they start experiencing it. Consequently, this *"huge gap"* (Teacher_33) leads students, *"even the students who do well in O level, (…) [to] have a shock [when they start Sixth Form]"* (Teacher_33). This is due to the fact that, *"they don't expect that workload"* and *"there is not an easy transition from one level to another"* (Teacher_33).

Another aspect noted by some teachers is the transition from a single sex school to a mixed gendered learning institution.

ii. Factors encouraging students to continue to Further and Higher education

The teachers interviewed cited a variety of influences that can encourage students to continue their education. One of the factors involves promoting engagement throughout the educational experience of students starting from the early years so as to help them develop their voice and sense of agency: *"You've got to have a program that allows for them to have a voice, allows for them to argue and reason. The higher order thinking skills develop those. Those have to be developed early"* (Teacher_4). For the majority of teachers, it is imperative to help students realize the long-term benefits of continuing their education and assist them in developing meaningful life goals. This can be achieved through *"counselling [which] is actually very useful in trying to help students find a goal to achieve it, and understand what they're doing and how that relates to their goal"* (Teacher_1). Teachers believe the students themselves need to come to school with a goal in mind and recognize the importance of education in attaining their dreams. According to one teacher, the school environment at Sixth Form provided the means by which these goals are fostered: *"They come here already motivated to reach the tertiary level of education. Being in this environment helps them even more because everybody tends to go to university after completing their post-secondary studies here"* (Teacher_5).

In addition to cultivating students' long-term goals, it is essential to show how education can affect career prospects: *"we always try to give them a perspective outside of Sixth Form to see what they can develop on … once they leave"* (Teacher_38). According to another teacher, educational institutions are obliged to inform students about opportunities that exist apart from university. Offering constant encouragement increases the likelihood that students continue their education, especially by *"making them realize that whatever they do is valuable. Whatever they come up with can change things"* (Teacher_5). Teachers' interest in student lives and academic success is a principal source of encouragement even through as simple a task as stopping *"to talk to them about their study intentions of courses they intend to take up in university. These discussions and personal interest definitely motivates them and their personal interest to go in Higher Education"* (Teacher_8). To this end, instilling a sense of self-worth and respect in students along with discipline can lead to success, because *"to pursue Higher Education you need to be a disciplined person. There's no way that you can do a serious course at university without being a disciplined person"* (Teacher_17).

According to teachers, stipends have shown to be effective incentives leading students towards continuing their education. One teacher focuses on how receiving stipends can be indicative of the fact that the state and society as a whole take students' education and future seriously,

"The fact that you give students a stipend show that the state invest in them and is interested in furthering their learning and also is giving them enough funds to enjoy a good standard of living and at the same time continue studying. The stipend is a good incentive." (Teacher_35)
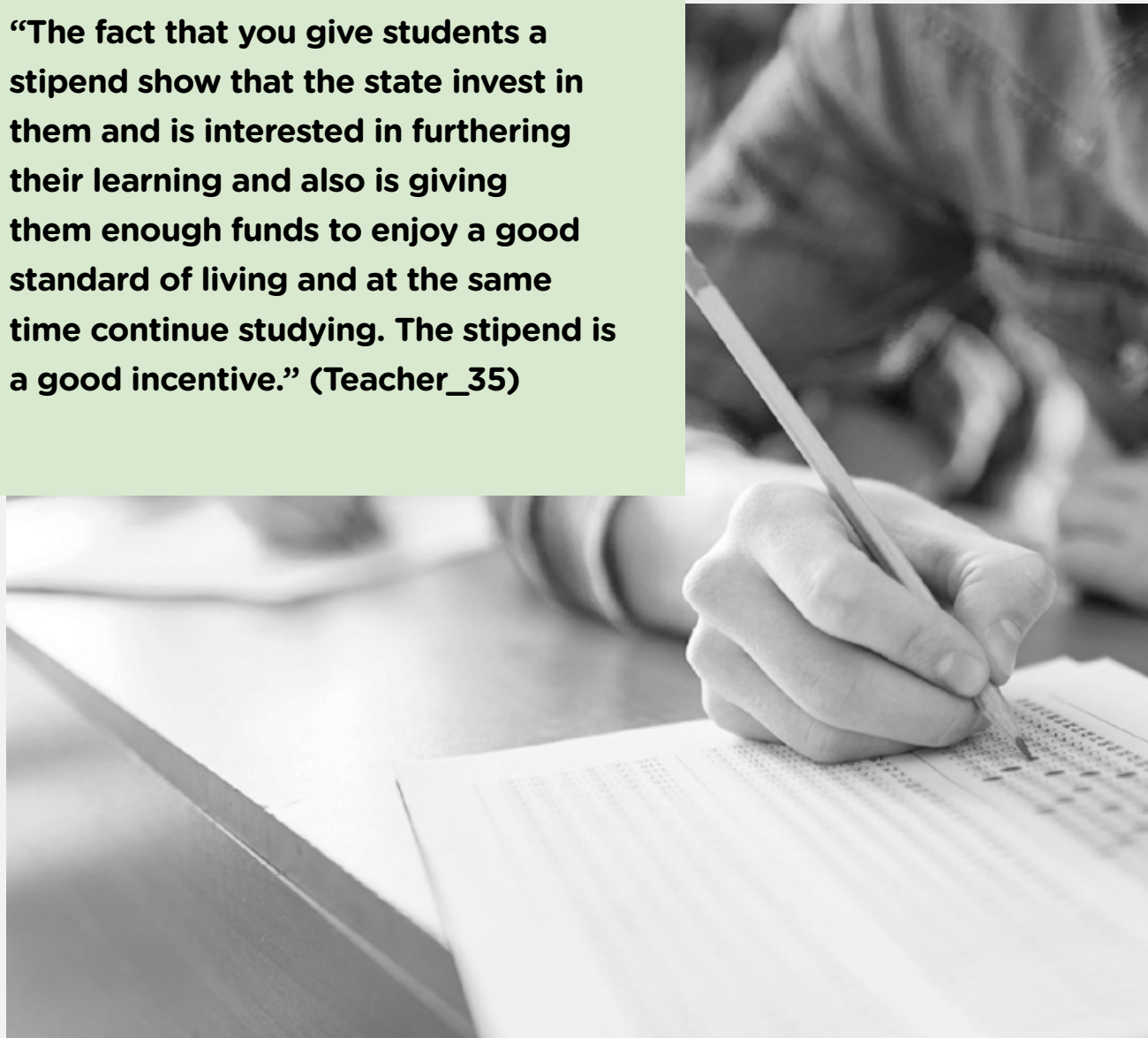
In addition to all the aforementioned points, there are teachers who believe that everything ultimately boils down to the student. Hence, the students' level of determinism is a defining factor because, *"if you are coming here then you should already have in mind that you want to further your studies but I do not think that all students come with this idea"* (Teacher_21). As such, students who do not have the right ambitions and lack determination may not be ultimately suited for Higher Education.

iii. Reasons for students' discontinuation of studies or dropping out

The majority of teachers interviewed believe that more often than not, for students *"it is a question of what they choose as subject"* (Teacher_7) that sends them spiralling down the wrong path. Student misconceptions about a particular subject have translated into choosing subjects that are either too difficult or quite irrelevant to their future plans. Consequently, teachers who offer guidance sessions to steer students in the right direction hope to help learners avoid *"the shock of their life"* (Teacher_9). Parents also play a powerful role in that they either push their children to taking a subject that may not be suited to their needs or interests, or fail to instill in students an understanding of the importance of education. Additional reasons referenced by teachers include lack of vision, unstable home lives, early entry into the job market either by choice or out of necessity, feeling of discouragement following poor exam performance and failing to understand the link between their subject of choice and their lives. Some teachers believe that students do not take their studies seriously because they are relying on their families for their future jobs. Other teachers criticize parents' lack of support and low expectations as reasons for the discontinuation of studies among students.

8.3. Administrators

i. Factors that encourage students to continue to Further and Higher education

According to the administrators interviewed, students who are goal oriented are more likely to continue their studies, especially when they are able to see *"the purpose of why they are doing something"* (Ad_6). However, these goals seem to be influenced and reinforced by expectations set by the school and the parents. The reinforcing language adopted by school administrators regarding students' decision to continue their studies means those administrators, *"never use the language, 'if you go,' it's 'when you go"* (Ad_2). This point signifies the importance of school environments where administrators take on the role of guides in an effort to help students make the best possible choices through career advice and by offering learners a more holistic range of choices. From the perspective of administrators, the most important elements that encourage students to continue their studies include placing high expectations on learners, adequately preparing them for Higher Education (Ad_2), going beyond traditional options and offering alternatives, implementing school policies that recognize the needs of individual students, and *"making students happier and being more student centred"* (Ad_5).

ii. Reasons for students' discontinuation of studies
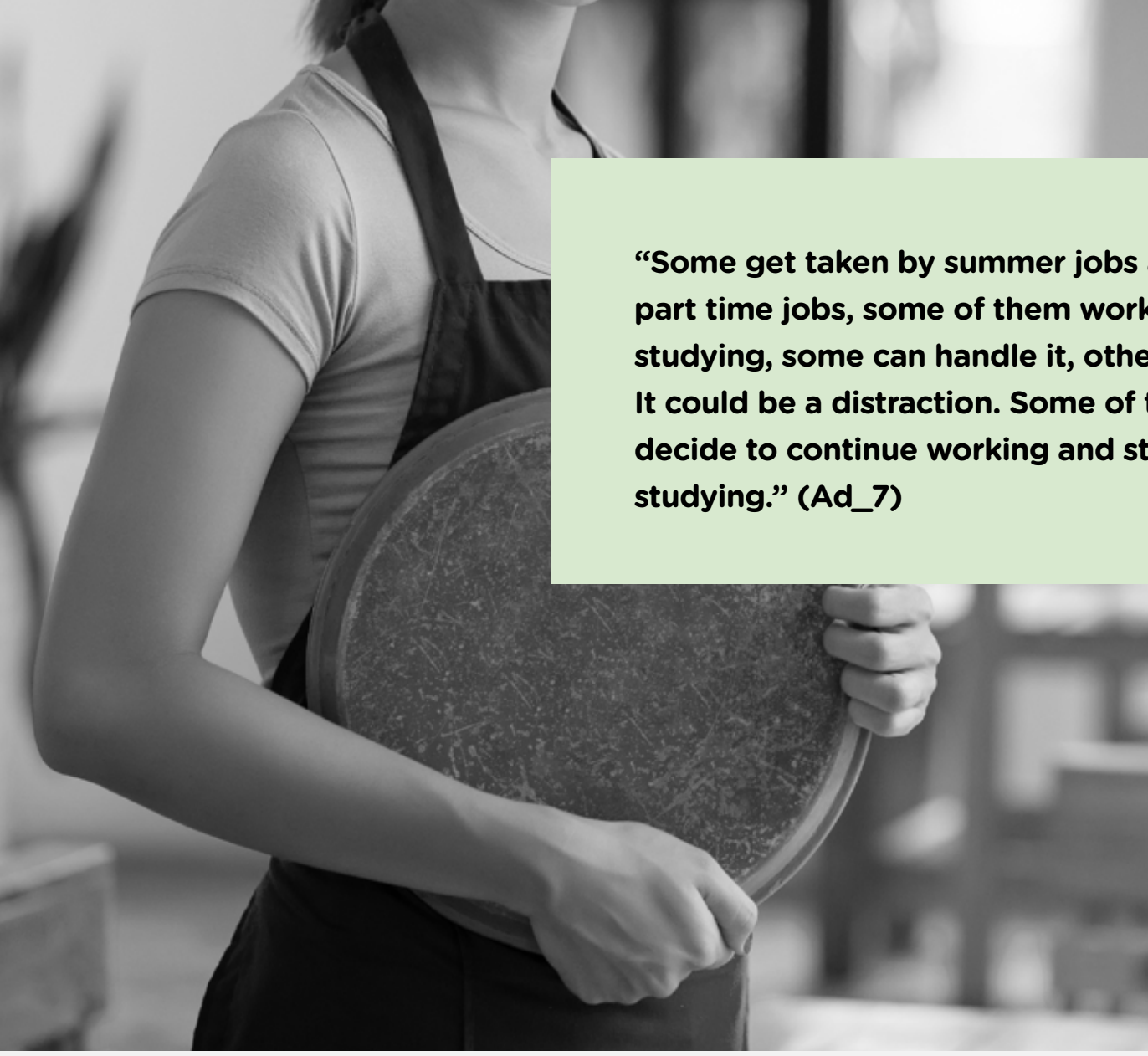
The majority of administrators mentioned that the reason behind students' decision to discontinue their studies relates to early entry into the job market and paid employment. In this context, one administrator states,
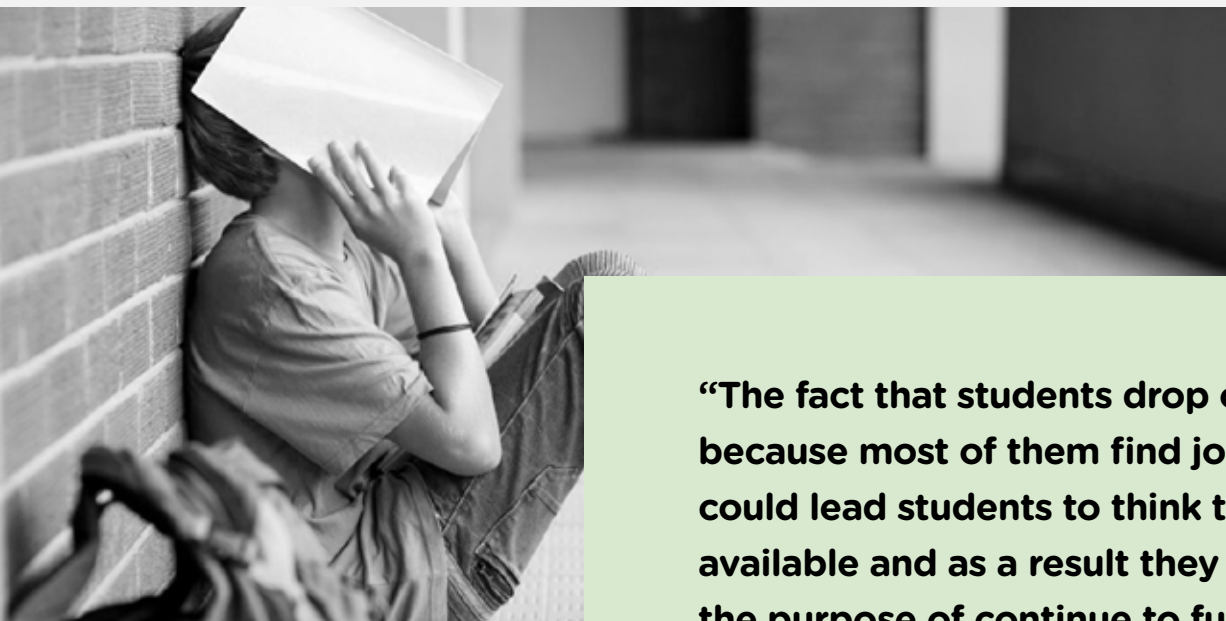
"The fact that students drop out is because most of them find jobs... which could lead students to think that jobs are available and as a result they don't see the purpose of continue to further their education." (Ad_6)

According to another administrator, *"there are a few who have to work for the family"* (Ad_12) or join family businesses. Students who find employment are more likely to leave the education system according to one administrator:

"Some get taken by summer jobs and part time jobs, some of them work while studying, some can handle it, others not. It could be a distraction. Some of them decide to continue working and stop studying." (Ad_7)

Students' impetus for discontinuing their studies can be influenced by numerous issues including wrong subject choice, lack of ambition and focus, immaturity, failing to understand the relevance of continuing studies to their lives, change in their future goals, harmful parental influence and pressure, family and economic problems, lack of preparation for Higher Education, and the inability to cope with the level of difficulty of the subjects selected.

chapter 9
comparative discussion

The purpose and meaning of education

The students, teachers and administrators partaking in this study maintain that the purpose of education is to equip students with a set of skills and competences to prepare them for their future lives in the workplace or in Further Education. While teachers and administrators emphasize the citizenship aspect of education, students do not seem to be highly concerned with it. Teachers and administrators attest that the Maltese educational system is constrained by a rigid, test-based system that prevents a focus on civics and holistic education.

Understanding and defining student engagement

Teachers, students and administrators define engagement as the behaviours exhibited by students such as compliance, willingness and motivation to participate in the learning process. The respondents define engagement from a cognitive perspective in consideration of students' active participation in the learning process. The emotional aspect of engagement is also explored through learners' sense of belonging to the school. Teachers and students assert that learners' engagement is a reciprocal process involving both learners and educators where the teacher creates an environment for student engagement to flourish.

Forms of student engagement and their importance and benefits

The participants in this study point to learners' active participating in class as a form of student engagement. The learners' participation in extracurricular activities and non-academic programs are also believed to be a form of engagement. However, the majority of the participants consider academic engagement as more important in Sixth Form because the students ultimately need to pass the exams in order to continue their education. In addressing the importance and benefits of engagement, students, teachers and administrators point to how active participation makes learning a more enjoyable experience. In addition, through the act of engagement, students find their purpose and are encouraged to put more effort into their learning and go beyond what is required in academic settings. Engagement also increases students' connection to the learning institution and cultivates more self-directed and independent learners. The teachers and administrative staff interviewed agree that engagement fosters student commitment, increases retention and impacts learners' futures as active citizens.

Signs of student engagement and disengagement

According to the interviewed teachers, students, and administrators, student behaviours such as attendance could be viewed as signifier of their engagement. But even more notable is active participation, motivation, interest and willingness to go beyond the requirements of the course. Students' desire to develop their capacity as independent learners and complex problem-solvers is deemed as another indicator of engagement. Meanwhile, for the majority of administrators, absenteeism is considered as a general indicator of disengagement while teachers count passivity, lack of interest in the course and failure to complete homework as features of disengagement.

Engagement in areas outside students' interest

A number of administrators, teachers and students state that it is imperative to encourage learners to engage in activities beyond their interest because it enables them to develop holistically. Despite possible resistance on the part of students, teachers and administrators are supportive of the fact that students need to be exposed to areas they normally might not express interest in. In so doing, students can expand their horizon and discover aspects of themselves that they might not be aware of yet. Teachers and administrators recommend that students should be forced to select certain courses because in life learners do not always have a choice to decide what they want. In a change of pace, a number of participants objected to forcing students to selecting subjects that do not interest them because it could ultimately lead to disengagement.

The role of students in student engagement

Although students hold themselves accountable for the level of engagement in the learning process, they also believe that teachers should create an environment that engages them and ultimately facilitates learning. Hence, the breadth of student participation requires a closer look at the concept of reciprocal accountability as a lens through which one can examine the relationship between students and teachers. The narratives produced describe students' active participation as a top priority for educators who support multiple dimensions of engagement that move beyond academics and rote learning. Teachers promote encouraging students to effectively communicate their needs and preferences but maintain that ultimately the choice to engage is on the shoulders of students. Through active participation, learners not only take greater responsibility for their learning in an effort to achieve their potential but their sense of agency is deeply enhanced as well. Students are viewed as "key enablers" and evaluators whose feedback serves as guidance for teachers who seek a more proactive stance. Although some teachers criticize students' lack of active participation beyond what the teacher is presenting, there is consensus among the respondents that students do engage when they realise its importance.

Student's lack of interest in various subjects may stem from different factors including wrong subject choice due to parental or societal pressure. Teachers argue that students' indifference toward their academic studies deserves closer scrutiny considering that engagement is a legitimate and desired outcome of the learning experience. The teachers interviewed maintain that one way to counter disengagement is for students to seek guidance prior to choosing a particular subject. The perceived support from peers is another predictor of engagement used to heighten students' interest and to motivate them to cooperate and be socially and academically responsible. The tendency for students to disengage, expecting to be 'spoon-fed' information rather than taking charge of their learning, is another issue of concern for teachers. To offset the effects of disengagement that lead to students' loss of enthusiasm for exploration, dialogue and reflection, teachers suggest that students exercise discipline and self-control and have clear goals for the future. Students' resistance to participation, according to some teachers, only accentuates the importance of academic engagement.

The role of teachers, administrators and parents in student engagement

Among teachers' responsibilities is their focus on inspiring students to become enthusiastic and motivated learners and instilling a passion for learning in them. The students offered contradictory views as to the role of the teacher with some acknowledging the positive impact of communication among them (particularly by email) and teachers' supportive role while others expressed disappointment over the fact their teachers did not believe in them. Regardless of students' appreciation of the teachers' supportive role in fostering an inclusive space that encourages engagement and motivation, students believe the real responsibility is on their own shoulders. For students it is important that teachers are accessible and respond to inquiries in a timely manner which can in effect make the learning experience more dynamic by eliminating historical boundaries such as teacher authoritarianism. Students' assessment of the teacher's accessibility, mentoring abilities, inclination to encourage participation and respecting the learners, influences their engagement. Teachers, too, underline the importance of mutual respect and the need to move past an authoritarian perception of teaching.

Administrators are expected to be accessible and encourage students to partake in extracurricular activities while also providing learners with guidance, support and care. Students question some administrators' 'closed door' policy, their inaccessibility, lack of interest in student concerns and inefficiency in their capacity as guides. As such, it is essential that administrators be sensitive to the demands placed on teachers and continues their support by developing policies and procedures that rally and motivate teachers. This is aimed at achieving the goals of the school while also ensuring the overall well-being of teachers. The position of all the cohorts in the study regarding parental involvement is that there needs to be a balance in the involvement of parents in their role as guides and support systems. The teachers and administrators interviewed are of the belief that parents need to be actively involved in a supportive capacity -albeit not too intensely- considering that students are still immature and need guidance. A close parent-teacher relationship can help educators get to know their students more profoundly.

Characteristics of good and bad teachers and students' perception of teachers

Students identified good teachers as competent instructors who believe in their pupils, express enthusiasm for their profession and are both flexible and passionate. Good teachers are also described as kind, friendly and helpful, who treat all students equally, listen carefully, care about student problems, and get to know each learner as an individual. According to students, it is critical for good teachers to motivate students through the adoption of appropriate teaching methods. In addition, effective teachers are described as being organized, firm, effective class managers and considerate of students' unique learning styles. Students depict good teachers as confident experts who are passionately located in the classroom and set high expectations while also challenging, reinforcing, and encouraging students. On the other hand, bad teachers create a distance between themselves and learners, practice favoritism, and are not approachable. Other qualities vocalized by students in their vision of a bad teacher is their inability to monitor learning activities, manage the class, enforce the necessary disciplinary measures and their inability to create dynamic learning spaces where students are encouraged to ask questions. Perhaps, the prime differences between good and bad teachers are that the former does not exercise favoritism, is supportive and friendly, exhibits empathy towards learners and identifies with students by taking into account their individual learning needs.

The reasons behind engagement: The school environment

Teachers and students argue that what compels learners to engage is having a goal which motivates them to work. Students' interest in a subject can cause them to engage especially when they consider it to be relevant to their future. Students also underscored that a powerful support network within the school not only is a source of encouragement but also allows learners to have higher expectations of themselves and can result in a renowned sense of purpose. Students, teachers and administrators believe that a positive school environment that considers failure as a natural part of the learning process can make students feel comfortable, safe and confident enough to take risks like voicing their opinions or asking questions.

Taking into consideration the combined influence of the school's physical environment and pedagogical practice, students stress that an engaging space personalizes the learning experience and helps them develop their potential. Overcrowded classrooms have consistently been cited as a reason for increased levels of disengagement. Hence, classrooms with ample space are more conducive to providing appropriate settings for learners to engage by introducing activities that are task-oriented. In these classes, students and teachers experience more one-on-one interaction which allows learners to get to know their teacher better and for the instructor to have a more vivid understanding of the students' individual needs. The importance of hygienic spaces and areas where students can spend their spare time or study in their free hours is pointed out as well. The synergy that is created between students, teachers and administrators can help increase student engagement. In the case of administrators, effective and strong leadership is referred to as a means by which student engagement is fostered in the school environment.

The reasons behind engagement: Students' socio-emotional wellbeing

According to students, teachers and administrators, students' feeling of belonging is heightened by making them feel cared for and part of the academic family as opposed to mere numbers. This highlights the centrality of building personal relationships among students, the teaching staff and administrators. According to teachers, setting high expectations for students and building a rapport with them is a clear indication that educators have faith in them. In line with these assertions, a number of administrators preserve that teachers have to be engaged in order for students to be active in the learning process. From the perspective of teachers, friends can encourage engagement and function as reliable sources of support. As stated by teachers, students' socio-emotional wellbeing can be affected by the home environment as well. Overall, a challenging environment can encourage student engagement, particularly because learners remain interested in the learning process. Educators are adamant that students need to be exposed to different forms of engagement prior to their entrance to Sixth Form.

Administrators and teachers provide that students demonstrate genuine motivation by expressing interest and a willingness to take responsibility for their learning. As far as students are concerned, understanding the relevance of the knowledge students acquire in class to their lives is a reason for them to continue their education. Students point out that planning to achieve a goal or a particular desired outcome is important as well. Being rewarded for their efforts and progress is another impetus for students to work hard and take on a more responsible and active role in their own learning. Despite students' role in the engagement process, schools can function as motivators and offer opportunities

to students to engage in self-directed and self-regulated learning. While it is necessary for students to be motivated and committed enough to take advantage of these opportunities, the responsibility does not always fall squarely on their shoulders. The extent to which students' family background, including their economic and social standing, can determine learner engagement or disengagement is a noteworthy point.

According to students, it is essential for teachers to foster more meaningful learning spaces by helping students apply their learning to life outside of school. In this vein, addressing student concerns as well as taking on real-world challenges can be accomplished by developing instructional activities such as story-telling and providing real life examples. As such, engaging in informal conversations to discover students' interests outside of the classroom can be beneficial. Teachers and students are of the view that learners' voices need to be heard and valued by candidly asking students what truly engages them. Accordingly, assisting students to gain ownership of their own learning requires teachers to implement syllabi that allow sufficient room for the inclusion of student engagement and apply pedagogies that inspire students' active participation.

The reasons behind engagement: The teaching and learning process

In an effort to make learning more relevant and appealing for students and enhance engagement, the importance of teachers changing and revising their pedagogy and improving the way a subject is taught is highlighted. From the perspective of teachers and administrators, students' interest is imperative in getting them engaged. This interest can be piqued by showing the relevance of the knowledge students acquire in school to their future. Hence, the concept of applied learning involving field work, practice-based learning, and outdoor lectures are among a myriad of activities that make learning enjoyable and meaningful and function as motivators for engagement. Students then need to move past mere memorization and become aware of the rationale and applicability of what they are learning. In this context, teaching methods that enhance student engagement and allow them to voice their concerns need to be interactive and involve discussions, group work, and dialogue in order to keep lines of communication open between teachers and students. In addition to promoting critical thinking skills in place of mere memorization, teachers are expected to account for different students' unique learning styles. Students, in particular, are in favour of scaffolding teaching in a challenging environment where they are progressively guided toward greater independence. There is a preference for the use of social media, visual aid and technological tools such as projectors and interactive whiteboards as a means to facilitate learning and further engage students in the learning process. Alternative spaces that afford students and teachers the opportunity to share information, news or concerns also allow less confident students to speak up.

The reasons behind engagement: Assessment methods

Various qualities related to assessment can contribute to student engagement including receiving constructive feedback from teachers. While some teachers disapprove of how focusing solely on exams and grades can prevent students from improving, others state that without it learners might not be driven enough to study for the course. The contradictory views regarding summative assessment is evident throughout the current study as some students claim that frequent testing pushes them to study while all three groups in the study reiterate that such evaluations fail to show learners' full potential. These summative evaluations only test memorizations, place immense pressure on learners and do not take into consideration students' work throughout the academic year. There are teachers who exhibit a positive attitude toward continuous assessment because it takes every aspect

of students' learning into account including attendance, student behaviour, assignment completion and the quality of the work submitted. Nevertheless, teachers have pointed out that in large classes, it is quite difficult to assess students on these bases. Students, teachers and administrators encourage the adoption of alternative modes of assessment which take into account individual idiosyncrasies and allow students with different capabilities to reveal their full potential

The reasons behind engagement: Extra-curricular activities

Extracurricular activities are beneficial for students attending Sixth Form in a number of ways including increasing motivation, making learning fun, relieving stress and developing close relations among students and teachers. School-initiated extracurricular activities are a great way to build teamwork skills, make friends and instil time management skills by helping students balance their academic life and extracurricular programs. Students, teachers and administrators affirm that participation in such activities helps students develop their character, increases their feeling of self-worth and self-confidence and makes them aware of their capabilities and interests. The importance of more choices in terms of extracurricular activities and students' awareness of them also need to be addressed. Striking the right balance between studying and extracurricular activities should mean that students do not neglect their academic deadlines, miss classes, or participate in legitimate extracurricular activities too close to exam time without compromising their grades. A healthy balance of academia and extracurricular engagement is key to a successful Sixth Form experience. Consequently, to enhance the benefits of a symbiotic relationship between these two areas, students are offered incentives through parents and peers which can sway their decision in the direction of extracurricular activities.

The reasons for disengagement

To battle boredom, educators are encouraged to adopt teaching methods that spark student engagement. Teachers believe the way a subject is taught and the particular pedagogy embraced can lead to boredom, passivity and disconnectedness among students. While matching teaching methods to learning goals and styles is important, it is also essential to analyze factors such as 'lack of discipline', 'lack of commitment', 'disinterest', 'lack of incentives', and 'lack of maturity' as contributors to student disengagement. Teachers and students believe that the learners' desire to follow specific guidelines because they are required to do so leaves them with a feeling of powerlessness and does little to help them find the relevance of their studies to their lives. While insensitivity from teachers and the school staff is seen as another reason for disengagement, students inability to cope with a course's level of difficulty, personal problems and learners' inability to integrate in the school environment to the extent that they feel like a 'fish out of water' are other factors

The reasons for disengagement: School-related issues and students' socio-emotional wellbeing

As stated by students, teachers and administrators, a school environment not supportive of student engagement is one of the top factors leading to disinterest in the learning process. Student disengagement can be increased by depriving learners of the chance to participate in decision-making processes concerning class and institutional policies. There are instances where teachers feel excluded from decision-making processes by the administrative staff. Among other factors influencing students' socio-emotional wellbeing are distractions caused by the disorderly behaviour of some students, a homogenous learning environment and indifference to students' preferences and needs.

Learning spaces that lack open lines of communication between students, teachers, administrators and school departments and do not encourage students to follow up on what motivates them are prime cases for disengagement.

Several other variables identified as obstacles to student engagement include the school's physical environment which can be both degrading and demoralizing, restricted study places where students find it difficult to concentrate and lack of adequate spaces where students can spend their free time. School deficiencies in terms of services, facilities, technological equipment and internet access can also be added to this list. Basic problems such as libraries not having specific opening hours can impact the amount of time students spend studying. Other issues include the proximity of students' place of residence and their school, appealing or disruptive environments around the school that make students reluctant to attend class and the school's inability to control students' whereabouts. Class size is another determiner of disengagement because in large classes students are more prone to feelings of anonymity, distractions and passive learning. In large size classes, students are not keen to participate and as a result feel isolated which can make it difficult to build a rapport with other students and the teacher. Additionally, teachers proclaim that large classes make it difficult for them to be flexible and prevent them from getting to know their students on a personal level. The limited attention paid to students, the implausibility of following up on them and students' feeling of discontent due to continuous disruptions are further impediments to engagement. In large class settings, students hold back because they do not know their classmates and consequently feel uncomfortable to participate during their lessons.

Students criticize unreasonable and unjust school policies and regulations such as restrictions in technology use in class and mandatory attendance which can affect student benefits and support. While students criticize how these policies make them apprehensive about their attendance and prevent them from focusing on actual learning, teachers are also weary of school regulations that engender student passivity. These include rigid attendance policies and regulations that do not permit students to proceed to second year at Sixth Form despite attaining acceptable grades simply because they are required to pass a specific number of subjects. There are educators who complain about regulations that limit them in their capacity as teachers to control students' disruptive behaviour. In the meantime, students and teachers express concern over long breaks or the absence of structured breaks between lectures which has led to an increase in absenteeism. Teachers also state that individualized timetables have made it difficult for students to make friends and present limited opportunity for teachers and students to meet outside the class. Both teachers and administrators call out the excessive bureaucracy and fund limitations that prevent proper investment in resources. Administrators affirm that the leadership approaches adopted by them and the difficulty in obtaining a balance between permissiveness and lenience can be a deterrent factor and lead to student disengagement.

Students' socio-emotional wellbeing can be negatively impacted by several factors including competitive environments, lack of support among students, peer pressure and issues pertaining to inclusivity which can lead to a dissociative state of mind and resistance to integration. Similarly, feelings of loneliness due to a lack of opportunity to develop new friendships in light of the different schedules students are forced to follow is viewed as a contributor to disengagement. On the other hand, some teachers take a drastically different position and assert that friends can potentially impede engagement by being negative influences on students. Furthermore, a negative relationship between teachers and students and a lack of communication among students, the administrative staff and teachers also play a substantial role here. Some students are not aware to whom they can turn to express their concerns considering that their relationship with the school staff is purely an administrative one. Students also express dismay over teachers who stigmatize low-performing students and the excessive pressure stemming from the school's high expectations and demanding syllabi that push them toward specific career paths.

The reasons for disengagement: Student dependent factors

Teachers, students and administrators believe that students' attitudes and perceptions can hinder their engagement. Teachers and administrators assert that student engagement occurs when learners are motivated and interested and not when they are passive and disengaged. Here, the significance of understanding the relevance of a subject to the students' lives and how it directly affects them is highlighted. In this context, once students lose interest, they become unwilling participants in the learning process and do the bare minimum in order pass exams. Administrators, teachers, and students stress that without motivation students do not express any enthusiasm to study or do their best and will essentially be indifferent to progress in their studies. Additional student-dependent factors that impact engagement include wrong subject choice, learners' lack of awareness about their choices and what it entails, being indecisive and parental influence. For many students, choosing a particular subject does not depend on their interest but on the fact that the course is a prerequisite for future degrees. The frustration that entails students' wrong subject choice is intensified by the fact that struggling with one subject tends to have an adverse effect on other subjects as well.

Teachers and administrators consider students' personality traits such as shyness, ineffective managers of time, indifferent and lacking commitment and yearning to socialize with peers rather than take part in academic learning as problematic. Despite students' difficulty in coping with certain subjects, parents continue to encourage them to engage in other activities which adds to the feeling of self-doubt, lack of confidence, fear of failure, and inability to cope well under pressure. Teachers have problems with students' obsession with grades as well as technology overuse including students' struggle to stay off social networking sites during school hours. Teachers stress that student engagement can be hindered by personal issues such as anxiety, turmoil and other changes occurring in students' lives which make it difficult for learners to focus. Teachers also identify conditions hampering engagement that are not entirely dependent on students, including learners' family backgrounds.

The reasons for disengagement: Students' non-ownership of their learning

Students and administrators acknowledge various elements that hinder students' ownership of their own learning. As far as students are concerned, being unjustly treated by teachers, unfairly graded in exams, being discouraged by teachers, and being prevented to continue to the second year of their studies at Sixth Form because of specific guidelines decrease students' ability to take ownership of their own learning. Regarding subject choice, students reiterated that not only were they forced to take certain courses because they were compulsory at Sixth Form, the subjects they did choose did not meet their expectations. Several students assert that not being permitted to choose their preferred subjects is restricting and instead recommended a customized educational program where learners can choose courses that are of interest to them.

The administrators voiced their concerns regarding these matters, asserting that education has become 'a rush to get rid of a subject' and if students do activities that are not explicitly in the syllabus, they consider it a waste of time. According to administrators, the option to do the final exam even during their first year of Sixth Form only aggravates the matter. This reiterates previous concerns regarding administrators' inability to implement a holistic vision of education and raises concern on the obsession with exams that not only influences students but also teachers and parents. Time constraints and overstretched syllabi with a lot of material to cover, according to students, makes them less prone to participate, show their full potential during assessment and gain ownership of their learning.

The reasons for disengagement: the teaching and learning process and assessment methods

In the section teaching and learning process, the issue of time constraints is brought to the fore again with teachers believing that students do not have time to do anything other than their academic work. In fact, teachers, students and administrators insist that a perfunctory review of the syllabus with a laundry list of course requirements, policies and expectations which can even be irrelevant at times, leaves little room for student engagement. Administrators and teachers both agree that there is a lot of pressure to cover the syllabus within a limited timeframe. One administrator even went as far as to declare that students are given just enough information to pass their exams. Students have voiced concern that teachers are more worried about covering the syllabus than ensuring students really understand the course content. Teachers, meanwhile, call attention to the fact that even though they would like to include more engagement by interacting more with students, they do not have enough time if they want to cover the whole syllabus.

Student relationships with their teachers are also a central factor leading to or inhibiting engagement. Students' problem with teachers' skills and attitudes are aggravated when instructors lack enthusiasm and are not eager to help, are unfair, practice favouritism and do not encourage students to engage.

This also impacts students' perception of and attitude towards particular subjects. While teachers confirm this point, they give prominence to the fact that the unappealing way a subject is taught, the pedagogy adopted, monotonous teaching practices and lack of dynamism in the class can hinder student engagement. Students claim to have difficulty engaging in the learning process because of the inadequate teaching methods employed and teachers being inconsiderate of students' different needs.

The presence of mixed ability learners in class has proven to be problematic for both teachers and students because of the different levels of attention students require. In Sixth Form, continuous efforts to involve students who have had little exposure to engagement throughout their educational journey has proven to be difficult and as such teachers recommend that students be exposed to engagement from a young age. The exam-based nature of the Maltese education system is another problem that distances student from a holistic education and encourages memorization for the sake of exams. For students, exams are a source of pressure and when they do not receive constructive feedback on their performance, students cannot learn from their mistakes. Both students and teachers describe the ways learners are assessed as unfair because they do not reflect the students' full potential and do not take into account students' efforts and the work carried out throughout the academic year. Despite an interest in alternative forms of assessment on the part of teachers, they may not know the students well enough to be able to implement such assessment methods. The fact that students can take the exam even during their first year of Sixth Form is another matter preventing learners from experiencing a holistic learning experience.

The reasons for disengagement: Extracurricular activities

Teachers, students and administrators point to different reasons as to why extracurricular activities can potentially prevent student engagement. According to several teachers and students, the Maltese educational system makes it difficult for learners to participate in extracurricular activities because it has a direct impact on students' academic performance. Administrators have cited instances where they stopped students from participating in extracurricular activities because of the pupil's inability to strike a healthy balance between such activities and their studies. Time restriction is deemed as a major factor preventing students from partaking in extracurricular activities. Due to these time constrains, students were even forced to quit extracurricular programs in order to keep up with their studies. Teachers are exasperated by the fact that they no longer organize outings because it takes time away from covering the intensive syllabus. Some administrators proclaim that teachers often complain that students are missing classes because of extracurricular activities. According to teachers and students, awarding an official slot during school hours to extracurricular activities could alleviate the problem at hand. Students have pointed to several sources of discouragement, including their preference to focus on academics, incurring costs, lack of activities that interest them, extracurricular programs not meeting their expectations, personality traits such as shyness and fear of judgement, unawareness of the available programmes and a lack of support from parents and teachers.

chapter 10
analysis and recommendations

The current chapter draws on the most recurrent topics derived from the survey and interviews by the three respondent groups. The generated topics arise from how teachers, administrators and students perceive student engagement and offers up new avenues to explore and further illustrate this complex concept. This chapter presents an analysis of the respondents' views and a number of conclusions and recommendations stemming from the gathered data.

Student related aspects

One of the central issues singled out in the report is that students have been "spoon fed" throughout their educational experience and have subsequently never had the chance to become self-directed learners. Students point to the teacher's leading role in the classroom and hold the teacher responsible for constructing an engaging learning space. Despite attending Sixth Form, students lacked time management skills, did not know how to study on their own, required adult guidance and sought support and boundaries. Students' passivity is witnessed in the emphasis laid on teachers' notes, teachers' questions to ensure they are following the lesson and teaching in a scaffolding format. Disruptive behaviour and absenteeism are believed to be caused by a lack of discipline and excessive teacher leniency. Rooted in an educational system that does not reinforce active learning, students' dependence reflects the protective and nurturing culture in Malta. This is manifested in the way good teachers and administrators are portrayed by the students as 'caring', 'nurturing', and 'motherly'.

This is further unsettled by students' lack of confidence and leadership skills coupled with personality traits such as shyness, timidity and hesitance to speak up to the extent that participation in class and expressing opinions are considered as "taking risks". Students' need for reassurance and encouragement from adults is expressed by the need for teachers and administrators to 'believe in them'. In learning spaces that encourages intense competition, instead of cooperative skills and mutual support among students, it is inevitable for activities such as group work to be considered as one of the least effective methods of learning. It is in this context that questions regarding whether Malta's education system forms empowered, skilled and self-directed individuals need to be asked. Feedback obtained through the survey and interviews have generated a number of recommendations that can help address these concerns:

- It is important to have an educational system that gives students a voice and empowers them. This can be done by consulting with students about regulations, involving them in the decision-making processes at the institutional and national level, conducting satisfaction surveys and collecting periodic feedback from them regarding teaching, syllabus, and school life.
- Students need to be trained for leadership skills, team work, time management and independent learning. These should be incorporated into the education system as early as possible.
- Students attending Sixth Form need clear boundaries as well as adults in supervisory and authoritative positions. The school should have clear disciplinary policies developed in cooperation with all the stakeholders including the students themselves.

Teacher related aspects

The respondent groups portray teachers as key actors crucial to student engagement in Sixth Form. Teachers believe that factors such as the students themselves, policies, parents, and the syllabus play a negative role in enhancing student engagement. This is while teachers see their own performance and teaching styles as favourable to student engagement. Throughout the interviews and the survey responses, teachers stress that they value student engagement and have made attempts to implement it in class. In the quantitative part of this research, students rate their teachers positively but in the interviews learners allude to a number of instances where the teachers' attitudes or teaching styles negatively impacted them. Irrespective of the challenges faced by educators in attempting to revise their teaching style, their teaching methods need to be updated to ensure students engagement and interest. The reality of the situation, however, might be that even though teachers consider student engagement as important, they cannot give it enough attention due to factors such as demanding syllabi, large class sizes, administrative guidelines, high parental expectations and student focus on exams and academic achievement. Teachers' commitment, enthusiasm and drive are also considered crucial to student engagement. In this respect:

- Teachers should be involved in designing the syllabi and their feedback should be taken into consideration when developing school policies and implementing reforms.
- Continuous professional development should be provided to train teachers on how to incorporate student engagement in their teaching plans and styles.

Relevance and subject choice

Scholars the like of Wigfield and Eccles (as cited by Highs and Andrews 2009) argue that student engagement can be identified through the utility values that students give to a particular task when compared with costs and sacrifices necessary for a successful completion. This was confirmed in our study as the issue of usefulness and relevance has been identified by all groups as key to student engagement. However, the three groups of respondents define relevance differently with administrators leaning toward involvement in school and students' sense of belonging to the school; teachers, linking relevance to citizenship and efficacy in the workplace; and students' understanding of relevance in terms of the degree to which it focuses on their interests or helps them transition to university. Students' interest in tackling their immediate needs and interests could be indicative of a lack of awareness about their future roles as active citizens and responsible employees. In assisting students developing long term plans and life goals, learners are more likely to be motivated to learn and be engaged in schools.

One of the recurrent problems is that students do not make well-informed subject choices during Sixth Form and are not prepared to take on the workload required to succeed. The recommendation to raise awareness among students as to the different paths available after secondary schooling and exposing students to diverse learning possibilities is a relevant one. Although it is important to raise awareness early on, students should not be driven to select a particular subject or make important career decisions at a young age. Parental influence, school guidance and support, as well as effective teaching methods can all help raise student awareness regarding their strengths and areas of interest. Skilled teachers who are able to include engagement into their lesson plans tend to use real life examples and hands-on experiments.

School and administrative aspects

The administrative staff, as the main decision-making body in the school, plays a major role in student engagement. Open door policies where administrators are physically and emotionally present for students have been favourably mentioned. The administrative staff's management of factors such as physical resources, class size, communication among all stakeholders and involving teachers and students in decision-making processes will ensure a general school ethos. Issues hampering student engagement include badly-designed timetables where the ones with long gaps between sessions lead to distraction and absenteeism and the condensed schedules places immense pressure on students and leave little place for social interactions. Instead, a well-structured timetable with scheduled break times and slots allocated to extracurricular activities is recommended. Physical resources, including well maintained areas where students can spend their free time, are also considered as crucial for student engagement. Allocating a specific area for students to spend their free time can enhance their sense of belonging to the school, especially by encouraging pupils to manage and take care of this area as student 'territory'. To address similar issues, the administration can promote strategies such as creating a student support personnel list, backing student clubs and activities and assigning a school teacher to students as their contact person in school and following up on the students' progress and concerns.

The syllabus and the general education system

The students, teachers and administrators partaking in this study criticize the educational system of Malta for focusing on memorization and examination. For the majority of students, the focus is on high academic achievement, passing examinations and attaining high grades. From the perspective of teachers, students are only interested in their academic performance as opposed to obtaining life skills, improving their general knowledge and engaging with the broader community. In his frustration-self-esteem model, Finn (1989) argues that disengagement may be driven by the students' constant low achievement, which lends itself to a sense of frustration toward education. Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2011) consider student engagement as a cumulative process, indicating that student engagement does not occur suddenly. The data from the survey and interviews reveal that the Sixth Form syllabus puts pressure on the education system, prevents the incorporation of students' interests in the lesson plan and is considered as a limiting factor in student engagement. One administrator used the term "at the expense of going out of the syllabus" when addressing the need to keep engagement in mind during teaching.

Alternatively, another option to consider is extending Sixth Form to three academic years in an effort to give students more time to engage. With more time to complete Sixth Form, students can select a wide array of free and non-compulsory subjects in line with the courses they are required to take for their A levels. These free subjects offer students the opportunity to explore personal areas of interest and become better-rounded individuals. As for those students who do not perform well academically, these subjects can turn into an opportunity to perform well and enhance their school experience. Furthermore, more time to complete Sixth Form can help students in the transition from secondary to post-secondary education.

In line with Finn's (1998) participation-identification model, a longer timeframe or revised curriculum for Sixth Form related to workload and study requirements allows students to have a positive and successful experience in Sixth Form. It is crucial that the curriculum of Sixth Forms and Junior College undergoes major revisions to address concerns and reservations identified earlier. A revised curriculum can help teachers who persistently highlight the demanding syllabus and time limitations as the main reasons that prevent them from developing engaging lessons. Extracurricular activities are another aspect that are considered important in student engagement but have been marginalized due to extensive syllabus requirements. Extending the Sixth Form timeframe to three years opens up new possibilities which promote extracurricular activities. Moreover, and equally important, is the need to create alternative and more meaningful forms of assessment that are not exclusively dependent on a summative and high-stakes examinations. In this regards, it is suggested that a credit system be considered for Sixth Forms and Junior College. Such programme delivery can also accommodate the needs of students who enter the labour market, since, as previously indicated, one of the major causes behind the discontinuation of studies is students' entrance into paid employment either because of financial problems or due to the instant gratification that comes with having a stable income. Hence, a more flexible Sixth Form syllabus and guidelines can make it possible for students to take the time they need to complete their studies, alleviate pressure and increase students' chances of success. Keeping the needs and benefits of each and every student in mind, it is evident that a number of reforms are needed to ensure that students can relate their learning to self-fulfilment and satisfaction as soon as possible in their journey into further and higher education.

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