



Transcript- Episode 70

When “Doing Nothing” is Actually Doing Something:
Reframing Engagement

I have good news for you folks.

Today is about reframing engagement and that often with students, doing nothing is actually doing something. I would even say for teachers and educators, quote unquote, doing nothing is actually doing something. We call that an access point through pause, wait time, but we won't get ahead of ourselves.

Go ahead. I mean, I'm already excited. So Kristie, Kristie, Kristie, do you mean to tell me that when a kid is sitting there or wandering or opting out, like saying no or staring out the window, that's okay? I'm going to even pick on just staring out the window as a necessary part of the day.

Okay. So in this episode, we're going to challenge the idea that learning looks like busy, verbal and compliant.

And we're going to talk about what Kristie just began to talk about, which is regulation and engagement and learning can look like quiet, slower and invisible tasks.

And that we might have to honor the different rhythms in order to give all kids access. So this episode is going to invite us to stop interrupting regulation and start noticing what learning actually looks like. Julie, stop disrupting regulation.

So Kristie- Where do you come up with these things? This is so hard for me and I am terrible at it. I do not like wait time. I know you don't.

I do not like slow-paced. You do not like one thing on the screen without movement. I need many things at the time.

So maybe some of you know, I have ADHD as an attribute and superpower and very big challenge. And for me as an educator, this was the hardest thing. It still is the hardest thing for me.

Even when we're co-teaching, if I give people four minutes to reflect, Julie's like, four minutes, they can do so much in four minutes. I'm like, they can't even get in a small group in four minutes. I literally sometimes turn off my camera and lay on the floor during those four minutes and think like, do a prayer like, dear Lord, help me get through these four minutes because it seems so long. Or she'll say, I'm going to give you a whole 20 seconds. And I'm just like, what in the world will we do with 20 whole seconds?

But Kristie, I was, when I would co-teach, so picture this, even I'm picturing eighth grade, I'm picturing Lisa Berry Kepin was her name. So if you're listening, she was the science teacher.

I was a Special Ed teacher. And I would say to the class, get the seven things you need to get and join me over at the lab tables. You have 10 seconds, ready, go.

And I was flipping delighted by my strategy, by how fun it was, by how everybody was racing around the room. And, you know, I would count down loudly too. So I would add a lot of input and I'd be like nine, eight, right.

And it was so fun. And what Kristie has taught me is that I just pushed probably half or more of those learners outside of their optimal learning experience because I set their nervous systems on fire. Now, it works for mine.

I love to race and rush because that's how I actually can get myself to do anything all day long. So let's talk a little more about this, Kristie, and why in school systems, we have these ideas that learning looks like verbal, compliant, sitting still, eyes forward, hands working, but actually might look like wandering or staring out the window.

So at least two things, Julie.

Yeah.

When you first said why we think that, I thought you were inviting me to talk about the white dominant culture and our obsession with those things. And then I noticed it was more of a rhetorical to say learning can look like other things.

But may I just say for the record, the why we prioritize the compliance, the eyes on traditional way of looking is really from a colonial white dominant culture that has a very narrow view of learning and is what the white dominant culture perpetuates as quality or where a teacher has control and students are in a dominated role, but I can't think of the word. Anyway, subservient or something, because that's like the value of the white dominant culture. So that aside, if we use a brain based lens, or let me just use a reality lens.

I'm one adult and I have 25 kids. So Julie, back to your example of the eighth grade lab, let's just say half the kids were like you and half the kids were like me, but you're just one adult. What do you do? You don't get to say, oh, everybody just take your time. You have 42 minutes before the next class period.

Correct. And some people need that to be motivated to do the lab experiment.

So what do you do when you have all these different nervous systems plus yours?

Okay, I'm going to give an answer to it. You might have not even wanted an answer, but I'm going to say these are the seven items required for this lab and they're in a visual form. I've explained them, I've shown them and I say, you can come to the lab table in 10 seconds or you can come to the lab table. You can take as long as three minutes, whatever you prefer. Go. And now I go, ooh, I'm like

Kristie and I'm going to gather my stuff and I'm going to alphabetize my things and make sure that they're in the correct order.

And then I'm going to color code them on my way. And then I'm going to be the most prepared student at the lab that ever was or will be. Did you see me sit up straighter?

Yeah, you're excited.

I know. And for me, I'm going to race all around the room in a harried way. My hair will be a mess. I'll be flying around. I'll be grabbing the stuff and I'll be getting there safely, of course.

Of course.

But we both have options built in. Now, Kristie, I've raced there. I'm there in 9.3 seconds. I get a moment to pause, which is really healthy for me because it's not how I roll.

Yeah. Yeah.

So it's like it's built in, but it's not all in the beginning. So like you can take your pause at a different time. So it's like, it's like everybody doesn't have to be ready and everybody doesn't have to be ready to pause.

Everybody doesn't have to be ready to nap. You've got this little window where people can learn to self-regulate and bring themselves down from the running around or gear themselves up for the activity, whatever they might need. So let's just start there.

We probably need to even start back with like, what is engagement? Why can it look like different things or why should it look like different things? Because let's say you remain a little bit harried in my perspective, right? You're moving quickly. You're already done with half the lab lesson and, you know, the other kids are just getting there and you're like done. And I'm like, you can't be done.

So like I have to still honor that. Oh, and there are ways to honor it and there are ways to squash it or squelch it or make someone feel bad about it. So I've always been the kid who was supposed to go back and add detail because you cannot be done by now, right? And my dream and goal is to get done so I can move on to more interesting things.

Like my brain is expansive. I love to learn. I love to do things, but I'm not going to linger on a task that doesn't feel like it needs lingering on.

So what Kristie's inviting us to do is recognize that we're using me and Kristie as the example, but in every classroom, you're going to have this wild range of tolerance to pace and to verbal and to stillness and to every aspect of schooling. And I don't want it to be a spoiler alert, but essentially, it's the more you add in choice about how to participate and the more you say, wow, you did complete that.

Excellent. Next. This is what I'm wondering. Do you want to do this or this, right? And you keep the child engaged instead of saying you can't be done. There's no possible way. This has got to be poor quality. So two things that made me think of Julie.

One, we have a download for this handout because we're going to come back to this word participation, this word engagement. So I want to make sure people get that at [inclusiveschooling.com/download70](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download70). We also have a resource called fast finishers that are by age and grade level that I'll put in the Show Notes.

We won't go into it because that could be a whole 'nother podcast episode. But if you're like, I do have kids that do things quickly. How do I honor that and keep them motivated to do something that is productive, quote, unquote, because some kids to be quite honest, their prefrontal cortexes are still developing.

So they might start to go light fire to somebody's thing or them or distract them in some way. It's all fine. But how do we keep them on a path that keeps them engaged in a way that is still productive? But let's talk a little bit, Julie, about, you know, you use the word participation. Sometimes we use the word engagement. How do we help people look more broadly at their definition of that word or those?

I think it's I guess, Kristie, it's honestly asking that question. What is my definition of engagement? What else might be happening in this student's brain right now? And so engagement might look like listening without responding.

It could look like observing. It could be just taking breaks between bursts of participation. It could be not choosing to engage yet.

It could be just participating internally. But what we have to remember is engagement is not performance. And it's very often not visible.

And so what you're asking is to say, well, what is our definition of engagement? Which is actually the question. And then who benefits from our definition of engagement? So learners like me benefited from my type of engagement. Fast thinkers, quick movers, excited learners.

Fast processors. Those were the people that I was advantaging. And yeah, as a teacher, as a teacher, I see.

And yet there are plenty of people who are slower moving, more deliberate, more thoughtful, needing more time between tasks. All the ways that we want to talk about it that I was disadvantaging. And so the fact that you said we have to look at our definition of participation and then ask one further question.

Who are we advantaging and who are we disadvantaging using this definition? And how do we make sure that a new definition can be formed that would benefit all the students in our classroom?

Yeah. And even if you're just one adult, how are you using the environment? How are you structuring activities? Notice when Julie gave her example of choice, she said, I've got a visual of the directions. I've verbally said the directions.

They're posted at the lab stations as well as at the front of the class. So she's utilizing the environment as a co-teacher. She can also have a station that is maybe where you go after you finish that takes the lab experiment and circles back or goes further with it.

So she's using stations to help her teach. All of these ideas start to come out and go, oh, this is possible even if I'm just one person.

Yes. So Julie, let me ask you this because we're a little bit mindset, little bit about practice as we're going back and forth. You know, we love language that lifts. We love restoring.

Can you give us some language swaps for as I'm trying to move away from how I talk about a student who looks like they are not engaged?

Yes. Maybe something like this student needs regulation. This student takes time to recover between tasks. This student is working on sensory organization. So instead of saying things like off task or not participating or doing nothing, you would say they're regulating, they're processing, or they're engaging in a different way.

And those friends come straight from our handout or the download for this episode, because Julie, I just want you to do that one more time, the three reframes, but they can get it at [inclusiveschooling.com/download70](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download70). But just saying one more time because they were so powerful.

Yeah. So instead of saying off task, not participating or doing nothing, you would say the student is regulating, they're processing, or they're engaging in a different way.

Because I feel like sometimes people feel like they need to, I'm going to take on the role of a paraprofessional for a minute, and I might be assigned to a student, which is already a problematic practice, but you know what happens. And I worry if my student that I'm supporting looks off task or unengaged, disengaged, right? So I feel like I always have to redirect them, make sure they're compliant, make sure that they're looking at the teacher, make sure they're on task. So this would be very freeing for me to be able to talk to my other adults in the room and my other team members saying, sometimes this child is actually processing the information or they're just regulating their system.

So if you look over at us and it looks like they're off task, here's some other ways you might interpret what they're doing. And I think, Kristie, if you take what you just said and take it one step further, because you're nervous about them regulating, it is likely that you're going to disrupt what they need to do to learn. So it can be a very disruptive thing when we interrupt regulation, and we're doing so because it makes us more comfortable.

But in reality, when adults interrupt quiet moments, we probably are making their nervous system more dysregulated. We're probably making them more confused. We're also communicating mistrust, which I think is so powerful.

Mistrust, I just almost want to cry right here.

I do too. Because even going back to my example of myself as a student, every time I turn something in faster than the teacher could have imagined it to be done, the look on their face was, I doubt it.

Originally the opposite, like, why does it take you so long? Oh, the opposite is why it takes so long. Like that's the message I got was like, that task shouldn't have taken that long. Are you slow, quote unquote.

Yes, yes. And it communicates that this human doesn't know their own regulatory system well enough, and that there is a value being placed on faster, slow, loud, or quiet.

Yeah. And all of those things do the opposite of supporting learning. When we really want to say to students, I love that you took that time, Kristie, to get that organized together. And it's just like, I can see that this feels really important to you. I can't imagine if somebody would have said that to me.

Yeah. Or what if somebody said to you, Julie, like, you're amazing how fast you can process and do these things. I'm so excited that you're learning even more than I had planned.

Right. And Kristie, you're the only person in my whole life that's ever said it because you've noticed it, that I can process really fast.

Oh, yeah.

And so I always, I'm like, Kristie, give the example of how fast I'm at processing because I love to hear it.

Well, I'm sure you do because I was that person in your life too. I was like, Julie, you did not read all that. And you should be like, do you want me to tell you what it said? And I'd be like, yeah. And then she would.

And I'd be like, oh, okay. Yeah. But like, do you really understand it? I wanted to doubt her.

Right, right. And it's just like, what we have to do is not just expect and not just tolerate, but actually celebrate and support the ranges of learners in every single classroom and making sure that our definitions of things like engagement and learning aren't limiting some students and advantaging others, but we're widening what we're seeing and saying as engagement and learning. And that's really kind of the whole thing in this podcast is that we might have to reset for our listeners.

Every time we might say something like, why isn't this student engaged? And we might instead ask, what might be happening internally right now? Because that shift is going to change everything in the way that you look at and evaluate your students.

Well, and Julie, I know, I know we're getting a little long winded in this one, but I'm going to take that, what you just said a little further. Like, I love those invitations to ask those questions and to be curious.

Yeah. I'm also going to say, you know, as we're learning more and more about the brain, if you look at some of the work of neuroscientists, you know, people know that we follow the work of Dan Siegel quite extensively, or we resonate with it and our own work aligns. He talks about a healthy mind platter.

And so like, I'm not just asking these questions just out of curiosity or to be kind, but it's actually to look at this healthy mind platter. And he makes an argument that there are these seven different times that a body needs, like focus time, fine, physical time, connecting time. People go, sure, sure, sure.

But one of the times is downtime. And I would say kids with disabilities, when you said, who am I advantaging and who I'm not, I would say those outliers. And you and I, diagnosis or not, we're some of those outliers in terms of our processing time.

And so was downtime valued in our families, in our communities, in our schools, in our after school programs, doesn't matter where, again, because of the white dominant culture, but a downtime is non-focused. The aim is not to have a goal other than relaxing and recharging the system, reducing the negative impact that all of those stressors had. It's called daydreaming.

Open-ended play, exploration, being curious, right? No bombardment. Even when you, Julie, are moving quickly, there's another side to you that needs absolute, either really zoned in on something or zoned out, right? Watching some sort of documentary or some sort of housewife show or whatever, right? So it doesn't mean you always need, your body also needs that downtime. You need time to turn inward or zone out or space off.

And I think so many of our kids with disabilities have an IEP, especially design minutes. We have a para, we have this person coming in to work with us. There's no time to just zone out. Because we have on-task time on our IEP and someone's taking data on it. So I better look like I'm learning all the time.

And I mean, Kristie, you're describing something that took me until I was an adult to realize that my body will take downtime after I pushed it too far in a way that it's not expected or planned.

Meaning I fall face first into bed and that's how I stay for a while. And we've got to help kids learn that daydreaming and those beautiful moments of doing nothing can actually be pretty magical. So today we just want to thank you for joining us and beginning this discussion around accepting different types of engagement, accepting who gets to belong and widening that in new ways.

I just want to say thanks for slowing down with us today because we often rush through these podcasts and today we're doing it a little slower. So thank you.

SHOW NOTES

What This Episode Is About

What if “doing nothing” isn’t disengagement... but regulation?

In this episode, Julie and Kristie challenge one of the most persistent assumptions in education: that learning must look busy, verbal, and compliant.

If you are:

- Redirecting students who “look off task”
 - Supporting students who need more time, space, or movement
 - Wondering how to define engagement more inclusively
 - Trying to reduce behavior corrections and increase access
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Key Takeaways

- Engagement is often invisible, internal, and non-linear.
 - Stillness, movement, pausing, or even opting out can be part of regulation and learning.
 - Traditional definitions of engagement often prioritize adult comfort over student needs.
 - Interrupting regulation can actually disrupt learning and escalate behavior.
 - Expanding how we define engagement expands who gets to belong.
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Why Our Definition of Engagement Needs to Change

In many classrooms, engagement is defined as:

- Eyes forward
- Hands working
- Bodies still
- Immediate responses

But these expectations:

- Favor certain learners over others
 - Ignore differences in processing and regulation
 - Create unnecessary corrections and power struggles
-

What Engagement Can Look Like (Real Examples)

Engagement might include:

- Listening without responding
 - Watching peers before joining
 - Staring out the window while thinking
 - Moving, pacing, or fidgeting
 - Pausing between bursts of work
 - Briefly opting out, then rejoining
-

Regulation vs. Avoidance (A Critical Distinction)

Regulation

- Supports the nervous system
- Helps the student return to learning
- May look quiet, slow, or internal
- Is often temporary

Avoidance

- Prevents access to learning
- Persists despite support
- Increases stress over time

The goal is not to eliminate all “off-task” behavior, it’s to understand what it means. Because when engagement is defined too narrowly, we unintentionally exclude students who learn differently.

Episode Download / Handout

Reframing Engagement: When “Doing Nothing” Is Actually Doing Something

This practical guide helps educators rethink engagement through a regulation-first, inclusive lens.

Inside the download, you’ll find:

- A clear explanation of why engagement doesn’t always look visible
- Examples of what engagement can actually look like (quiet, slow, internal)
- A critical distinction between regulation vs. avoidance
- The cost of interrupting regulation in classrooms
- Language shifts to reframe how teams talk about student behavior
- Reflection prompts to build more inclusive definitions of participation

👉 Download at: [inclusiveschooling.com/download70](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download70)

The Adult Reality Check

Adults regulate all the time:

- We stare out windows
- We take breaks
- We move while thinking
- We pause before responding

We don’t call this disengagement. We call it thinking.

Additional Resources

Fast Finisher Cards are thoughtfully designed prompts that give students meaningful, self-directed options when they complete work early, helping maintain engagement without adding unnecessary or repetitive tasks. They offer a range of creative, reflective, and skill-building activities that support independence, student choice, and continued learning across diverse interests and ability levels. You can review the three types below:

- Fast Finisher (Secondary Edition) [[pdf](#)]
- Fast Finisher (Middle Level Edition) [[pdf](#)]
- Fast Finisher (Early Edition) [[pdf](#)]

[A Fresh Look at Learning Centers](#): This resource highlights the importance of shifting from behavior management to relationship-centered practices in early childhood settings, emphasizing connection, co-regulation, and understanding the root of children’s behavior. It offers practical, reflective guidance for educators to move beyond compliance-based approaches and instead create inclusive, responsive environments where young children feel safe, understood, and supported in their development. These ideas align with a broader commitment to honoring children’s right to learn through play and belonging.



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