

COMPANION EVALUATION DOCUMENT

Qualitative Data Collection Findings

A Summary of Findings from the Emergence Collective Participatory Evaluation

This document summarizes qualitative research conducted in partnership with TeachRock as part of a broader theory of change (TOC) and evaluation strategy development process. It is designed to complement the Drexel University mixed-methods study, which provides quantitative measures of teacher and student outcomes.

Evaluation Approach

Over the course of ten months, Emergence Collective partnered with TeachRock to collaboratively define its theory of change and evaluation strategy. The process was grounded in a participatory philosophy — evaluation is most meaningful when it includes the broad range of voices involved in carrying out the organization's mission.

Two primary methods were used to embed this participatory approach:

TeachRock Braintrust

A guiding team that met four times throughout the project to inform the situational analysis, define data collection questions, develop principles, and provide ongoing feedback.

Deep Listening to the TR Community

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, TeachRock staff, community partners, and board members — gathering first-hand perspectives from across the ecosystem.

Data Collection

Qualitative Methods

The data collection process began with the Braintrust identifying key audiences and guiding questions through facilitated activities. Three primary focus areas shaped the research:

Mission & Curriculum Perception

How do diverse audiences experience and understand TeachRock's mission and curriculum?

Teacher & Student Impact

In what ways has TeachRock curriculum improved student engagement and influenced teachers?

Strengths & Opportunities

What does TeachRock do best, and where are there opportunities to expand its impact?

Sample & Analysis

From a prospective contact list of more than 40 individuals, the team completed 17 interviews and 6 focus groups (3 with teachers, 3 with students) with a total of 34 participants. Interviews lasted between 20–60 minutes.

34 Total Participants	17 Individual Interviews	6 Focus Groups
---------------------------------	------------------------------------	--------------------------

Participants included educators and administrators (32.5%), students (44%), and partners including community partners and board members (23.5%). Qualitative data was cleaned and transcribed using Otter AI, then analyzed in Dedoose using a quasi-deductive-inductive coding approach. Each source was reviewed by at least two team members to ensure inter-rater reliability.

What Drives Engagement: Curriculum Elements

Interview and focus group participants identified four key curriculum elements as the primary drivers of strong student engagement, listed here in order of frequency mentioned:

- 1 Applied & Project-Based Learning**
The most commonly cited driver of engagement. Projects — from building a themed playlist to conducting oral history interviews — gave students ownership over their learning and provided alternative pathways to demonstrate knowledge beyond traditional tests and essays.
- 2 Personal Connection to Music & Culture**
Students were deeply engaged when they could see themselves and their communities reflected in the material. Music served as a bridge across academic disciplines, fostering personal connection even in subjects like math and science.
- 3 Discussion-Based Learning**
Both teachers and students valued open discussion over fact-based instruction. Students frequently contrasted TeachRock's dialogic approach favorably with other classes, appreciating the space to form and share their own interpretations.
- 4 Student Choice & Voice (“Choose Your Own Adventure”)**
Enabling students to follow their own interests — choosing topics, shaping projects, or influencing the direction of a unit — was consistently linked to higher levels of engagement and a stronger sense of ownership over learning.

Indicators of Student Engagement

Participants described five key indicators that a student is meaningfully engaged in TeachRock curriculum:

1. New or Changed Perspective

By far the most frequently cited indicator of engagement was a student walking away with an “aha!” moment — seeing something familiar in a new way or encountering knowledge that genuinely surprised them. At their most impactful, these moments led to action beyond the classroom.

“There’s power in me knowing the full story. I think students should feel powerful. They should walk out of a class knowing they can do something and change the world.”

— TeachRock Student

2. Active Participation

Teachers and students identified consistent attendance, animated classroom discussion, critical questions, and expressive body language as markers of genuine engagement. Several teachers noted that participation looks different for students with varying learning needs, and that a flexible definition is essential.

“Even people that don’t really love history are in the conversation. They’ll be in the back of the classroom like ‘That’s not right!’ And that is how you know that a class is engaging.”

— TeachRock Student

3. Learning That Transcends the Classroom

Some of the most powerful reflections described learning that followed students home — conversations with parents about history, connecting family music collections to coursework, or sharing lessons with friends outside school. These moments indicated deep internalization of the material.

“Every day in the beginning of the school year I was going home and re-teaching the lesson to my parents because I was so excited.”

— TeachRock Student

4. Music as a Unifying Force

Across differences in background, taste, and experience, music brought classrooms together. Participants reflected on how a shared relationship to music created common ground, allowing students to engage across cultural differences with less friction and more genuine curiosity.

“There’s no bias with music. It doesn’t matter their color, their race, their ethnic group. It brings a lot of people from all different cultures together.”

— TeachRock Student

5. Curiosity & Cross-Disciplinary Connections

Educators observed students drawing unexpected connections across subjects — carrying a history lesson into an ENL class, or using a music unit to better understand mathematical concepts. Genuine curiosity was seen as a clear signal of effective engagement.

Indicators of Teacher Engagement

Beyond student outcomes, qualitative data revealed four key markers of engaged TeachRock educators:

Enthusiasm for the Curriculum Teachers who fully adopted TeachRock materials demonstrated visible excitement, often sharing examples of student work and proactively looking for new ways to use resources.	A New or Changed Perspective Like their students, engaged teachers often reported seeing their own practice or subject matter in a new light after incorporating TeachRock curriculum.
Increased Confidence & Professional Depth Partnership staff noted that TeachRock equips teachers as informed, empowered decision-makers — deepening their content knowledge and enabling them to lead richer, more nuanced classroom conversations.	Ease of Use as a Resource The accessibility and comprehensiveness of TeachRock materials was highlighted as a major driver of teacher adoption and sustained use, allowing educators to build full, sequenced courses from existing resources.

Top Content Strengths

When asked about what TeachRock does best, the most frequently mentioned content strengths across all participant groups were:

1. Free and accessible resources — Broad availability was cited as a fundamental enabler of adoption, particularly in under-resourced schools.

- 2. High-quality, vetted content** — Participants praised the depth of TeachRock’s materials and the expertise of its content writers.
 - 3. Adaptable curriculum** — Educators valued the ability to customize materials for their classroom context, student population, and subject area.
 - 4. Alignment with academic standards** — Content was praised for its connection to existing standards, making it easy to integrate into formal curricula.
 - 5. Engaging materials** — The inherent appeal of music as a subject made TeachRock lessons notably more engaging than traditional alternatives.
 - 6. Facilitating critical dialogue** — Content was recognized for its capacity to open difficult, meaningful conversations in the classroom.
 - 7. Focus on diversity and equity** — Emphasis on non-dominant historical perspectives and culturally relevant content was a standout strength.
 - 8. Cross-curricular applicability** — TeachRock materials were used effectively across humanities, STEM, ENL, and other disciplines.
-

About This Document

These qualitative findings were produced by Emergence Collective in April 2022 as part of TeachRock’s theory of change and evaluation strategy development process. This summary is intended as a companion to the Drexel University mixed-methods study, which provides quantitative measures of TeachRock’s impact on teacher efficacy, student engagement, and classroom outcomes. Together, the two documents offer a comprehensive picture of TeachRock’s evidence base.