2015

Uncovering the Characterisitics of Elementary-Aged Student Engagement

Mark F. Schrader PhD
University of Southern Maine, Muskie School of Public Service

UNCOVERING THE CHARACTERISITICS OF ELEMENTARY-AGED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

By

Mark F. Schrader

B.S. University of New Hampshire, 1987

M.Ed. University of Virginia, 1997

C.A.G.S. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2002

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Public Policy

The University of Southern Maine

September 2015

Advisory Committee:

David Silvernail, Professor of Research and Evaluation, Advisor

Catherine Fallona, Professor of Education and Human Development

George Sheckart, Clinical Psychologist

LIBRARY RIGHTS STATEMENT

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Southern Maine, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for "fair use" copying on this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Librarian. It is understood that any copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature:

Date: September 18, 2015

UNCOVERING THE CHARACTERISITICS OF ELEMENTARY-AGED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

By

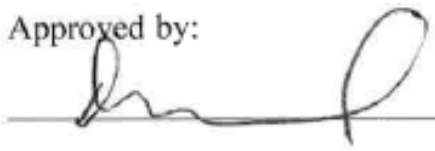
Mark F. Schrader

B.S. University of New Hampshire, 1987

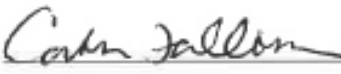
M.Ed. University of Virginia, 1997

C.A.G.S. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2002

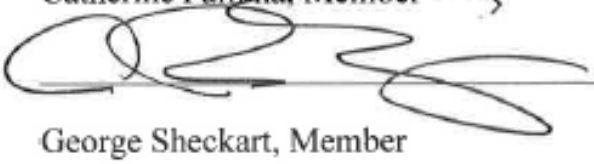
Approved by:



David Silvernail, Chair



Catherine Fallona, Member



George Sheckart, Member

UNCOVERING THE CHARACTERISITICS OF ELEMENTARY-AGED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

By Mark F. Schrader

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. David L. Silvernail

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Public Policy
September 2015

Researchers agree that students who are actively engaged in their own educations have more successful educational experiences. Studies show a connection between engagement and success in all stages of academic growth. However, researchers have made assumptions about the definition of student engagement by defining it through the adult lens. Some research suggests that engagement measured by visible behavior may be measuring only the appearance of engagement, not necessarily active engagement. (Lankshear & Knobel, 2005; Pope, 2001)

The purpose of this research was to uncover the characteristics of student engagement from the source: the child. Research has shown that lack of success in the later years of school often stems from disengagement in the early years of formal education. Thus, developing a knowledge base of students' internal thought processes around school activities in their elementary years can help develop an understanding of how to keep students engaged throughout their academic careers.

Twelve elementary school students, in the third, fourth, and fifth grades were interviewed using a multi-interview design. The findings provided insight into student priorities. Conversations with students suggested that they reflect on their school and learning frequently. Positive peer-peer, as well as peer-teacher, relationships were important to students. Their preferred assignments included a creative element, and working on assignments with peers was important for collaboration purposes, but not necessarily for product completion. Patterns in student preferences were found when subject responses were categorized by gender, grade level, and teacher-perceived engagement levels. The findings were similar to previous studies, but had the addition of depth and specificity in student responses.

Understanding student engagement through a child's lens is of great importance to designing curriculum, classrooms, and instructional pedagogy. Educators would do well to create a better understanding of both the emotional and cognitive engagement of their students to help them succeed as learners.

Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank the students who I had the opportunity to interview. They are and will continue to be proof that this work is worthwhile.

To my doctoral cohort group: thank you for the support, debates, compliments and criticism. It was an honor to be a part of those classes and projects.

To my advisor, David Silvernail, who over the past three years has challenged my way of thinking, introduced me to new perspectives, and has been one of my most memorable mentors: I will miss your classes and our conversations.

To my committee member, Catherine Fallona, whose sharing of experience in the qualitative world has been a refreshing change from her profoundly quantitative colleagues: I have appreciated your insight and suggestions.

To my committee member, George Sheckart, a colleague, mentor and friend: your willingness to let me bounce ideas off you and share your own dissertation experience has been most appreciated. I have modeled my interview style on the positive interactions I have witnessed you have with students over the years.

To my sisters, Beth Scrimger and Robin Schrader: thanks for helping to provide distractions over the past three years. The laughs really helped.

To my parents, Joyce and Steve Wheeler, and Bob and Dr. Suzanne Schrader: thanks for encouraging me for years to pursue this degree.

To my children, Jake, Jared, Joseph, and Jeremiah: your patience and forgiveness have allowed me to miss or be late to parties, soccer games, lacrosse games, and just hanging out, in the pursuit of education.

To my in-laws, David and Lois Lancaster: thanks for your unwavering support of my education, both emotional and financial. I am eternally grateful for your assistance to my children and wife while I was so busy with my studies.

Finally, to Julia, my wife: words cannot fully express my gratefulness and love. For more than 20 years, you have supported me through three graduate degrees, countless nights of studying, and putting household chores on hold. During all of that time, you have taken care of our children, received your own graduate degree, developed a career of your own, and kept me loved. While it might have been possible to complete this work without you, the journey would not have been nearly as much fun.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Researchers agree that students who are actively engaged in their own education have more successful educational experiences than those who are not (Carter, Reschly, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Wang & Eccles, 2011) However, researchers disagree on how engagement should be defined. Current definitions of student engagement have been developed by adults who despite their best attempts to understand children, cannot fully embrace what it means to be an engaged child because they no longer think like a child. This research sought to uncover the characteristics of student engagement from the source, the child.

Significant research supports the theory that students who are engaged early in their school careers realize greater future success than students who were not engaged. (Wang & Eccles, 2011; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2009; Ladd & Dinella, 2009) Similarly, researchers agree that the propensity of high school students to drop out of high school necessitates that schools identify indicators exhibited early in students' academic careers (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

While professionals do not agree on one comprehensive definition of engagement, there is a consistent belief that engagement has multiple components, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Since there is a lack of evidence to support a specific definition, researchers can offer few focused strategies to help educational communities improve engagement.

Emotional engagement is critical to academic success. Abraham Maslow's work on hierarchy of need has been cited repeatedly in research. Maslow's (1954) influential theory suggests that children's ability to be motivated by growth needs (e.g., academic achievement) first requires satisfaction of deficiency needs (e.g., safety needs, love/belonging needs). That hierarchy of need has been supported by research (Taormina & Gao, 2013) suggesting that vertical movement on the hierarchy is due at least in part to fulfilling a need lower on the scale. Specifically, the need of love and belonging needs to be met before students can engage in academic achievement.

Researchers found that children whose love and belonging needs are met early in life are able to develop successful and secure relationships. However, children whose needs are not met at home come to school seeking love and a sense of belonging (Prince & Howard, 2002). Prior to engaging in learning expectations, teacher must address students' emotional needs (Zigler & Finn-Stevenson, 2007; Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012)

Students who are disengaged early in school often drop out later in their schooling. School environments lacking an awareness of disengaged students may actually foster disengagement by not recognizing the early signs. (Finn & Cox, 1992). That leads to increased depression (Cole, 1991), aggression (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992) and increased probability of retention, truancy, and dropping out of high school. (Schoeneberger, 2012). In fact, behaviors such as absenteeism, noncompliance, disruptiveness, and inattentiveness seen as early as the third grade are reliable predictors as to whether a child will ever graduate from high school (Finn & Cox, 1992; Quigley, 1992; Schoeneberger, 2012).

A measurement of engagement created by students may reveal a more accurate description of engagement than one created by adults. Adult-created definitions of engagement are based on a perceived understanding of a child's world. Brain research clearly identifies that during the middle childhood years, a child's brain is processing information at a much faster rate than an adult brain (Mahi & Ford-Jones, 2012). Children therefore perceive the world in much more complex ways than an adult can imagine. Thus, when an adult defines a child's perception, it is likely that they are only "seeing" the tip of the iceberg.

Measurement of engagement has been restricted to reflecting on outcomes of engagement instead of the definition of engagement characteristics (e.g., "the frequency of asking questions in class" as opposed to "reasons why a student would want to ask questions in class"). That distinction separates the "whats" of student engagement from the "whys," thereby limiting insight for educators to develop strategies that are process driven.

Some research suggests that engagement measured in terms of visible engagement-behavior may be only measuring the appearance of engagement, not necessarily active engagement. (Lankshear & Knobel, 2005; Pope, 2001) That is supported by literature questioning the correlation between participation and learning. (Lankshear & Knobel, 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Pope, 2001). Harris (2008) referred to that as engagement in schooling instead of in learning. If improving learning is the underlying goal for increasing student engagement, then it is essential to identify predictors of engagement, rather than the appearance of engagement. Ultimately, "What

is most important about children can be learned only from children." (Landreth, 2012, p45)

Current understanding of student engagement is not sufficient to improve educational pedagogy. Researchers from multiple disciplines (e.g., educational psychology and developmental psychology) have attempted to define and quantify student engagement with varying results: "the same term is used to refer to different things… and different terms are used for the same construct" (Reschly and Christenson, 2012, p.11).That inconsistency of constructs limits conclusions that can be made through research.

Engagement "implies connection between students and the activities of schooling" (Ainley, 2012, p, 285). What is lacking in the research is an understanding of a student's internal thought processes about that connection (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). That critical perspective helps define how a student's engagement fits contextually within school. Whereas engagement in early years of schooling is often a predictor of later disengagement, there is a limited understanding of the factors of engagement in the early grades (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Therefore, developing a knowledge base of student internal thought-processes around school activities in the early years of schooling will contribute to the overall study of engagement.

Current measurements of student engagement involve surveys, checklists, and behavior scales. (Appleton et. al, 2006; Carter et. al, 2012; Hughs et. al. 2008; Skinner et. al., 2008). Those measurements are limited in depth, subject to the design capacity of the researchers themselves, who despite their best intentions cannot avoid the confounding problem of viewing student engagement through an adult "lens." That inevitably leads to

a limiting choice of responses, limiting style of response, and reliability on common language comprehension (Cresswell, 2009). Use of those tools presents quantifiable results which lend themselves nicely to measureable conclusions. However, when eliciting information from children, it is conceivable that some components of student engagement are overlooked or under-represented in an adult-designed tool. Conversely, open-ended questions yield more detailed, more accurate responses, and are less likely to mislead children (Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study attempted to contribute to the knowledge base of understanding student engagement. Developing a clearer understanding of student engagement will help support or refute adult-designed definitions of student engagement. It will help strengthen or rewrite the argument for the importance of facilitating practices to encourage student engagement in schools.

The purpose of this study is to uncover elementary students' perceptions about engagement in school and identify themes that may lead to increased engagement. "It is quite clear that, as adults, we will never see the world through a child's eyes; rather, we will see it through various layers of experience" (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003, p. 437). It was the intent of this study to uncover the various layers of a child's experience through a qualitative inquiry. This researcher investigated students' perceptions of their feelings and knowledge of their educational experience. Using a multi-interview approach, rich thick descriptions were unveiled to draw meaning from the students' experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In an effort to understand elementary students' perceptions about engagement in school and identify themes that lead to increased engagement, the following research questions were addressed.

Research question 1: *What do elementary-age children identify as characteristics of engagement?*

The purpose of the question was to identify specific characteristics or themes that increase the likelihood of a student becoming engaged, and perhaps avoiding disengagement. The answer to the question has been sought by other researchers but through the lens of adult-made constructs.

Research question 2: What are the similarities and differences among individual student characteristics (e.g. gender, preferred subjects) and student-identified engagement?

Current research already suggests that gender differences exist among children in their abilities to perceive emotions. It is reasonable to deduce that other differences and similarities may exist between students with varying individual characteristics. The purpose of the question was to investigate if those differences and similarities relate to their perceptions of engagement. That information could provide a basis for school programming among various subgroups of students.

In an effort to compare this research to previous research, the following research question was addressed.

Research question 3: *How do the characteristics of student-identified engagement relate to commonly used adult-identified characteristics present in the research literature?*

The purpose of the question was to identify characteristics or themes that are similar or different from the adult-made constructs. Similarities would produce supporting evidence for currently designed student engagement surveys. Dissimilarities could inspire further considerations for the developers of engagement surveys.

Whereas past studies have relied upon adult-created paradigms to develop an understanding of the questions, this study relied solely on those paradigms created by the students themselves through the interview process.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Understanding student engagement may be the key to reaching the disengaged learner. If educators are able to increase the opportunities for engagement at the elementary level, they may improve the chances that a student will experience future success. Whether it supports or redefines current definitions of student engagement, this research will help to solidify a common understanding of the elements of engagement.

Working educators can benefit from knowing the elements that engage and motivate children to learn. In a world where mass media, video games, and the internet vastly surround children, knowing the tools to engage students gives educators a competitive edge. The implications of this research could assist teacher training programs on how to design a classroom culture that engages all students. Similarly, the research could assist school administrators in determining teacher proficiency in maintaining student engagement.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the United States' government's Race to the Top campaign offered funding to states willing to develop and pilot new and innovative approaches to increasing student achievement (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009). The following year a national set of learning standards known as the Common Core was adopted by most states in the nation (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2009). Those two policy implementations have spurred educational researchers once again to find the "key" to unlock the mystery of why some students do not make sufficient academic gains in school.

Research on engagement early in a student's education found that "children's long-term achievement depends on the degree to which they develop a mindset that favors rather than rejects school, and a behavioral stance that mirrors this orientation (a propensity to approach rather than avoid school)" (Ladd & Dinella, 2009, p. 204). Furthermore, "Disengagement from school, which often begins during elementary school, is widely recognized as the principle long-term social-psychological process that turns motivated students into high school dropouts." (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2009, p. 14) Conversely, student engagement in school, regardless of definition, "has demonstrated relationships with academic outcomes such as state test performance, student achievement, and high school completion." (Carter, Reschly, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012, p. 62)

A significant body of research has attempted to understand the degree to which student personal engagement in their own educations can affect their academic

achievements. The difficulty in drawing clear answers from the research on student engagement is due to the varying definitions of engagement.

DEFINITIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006) defined engagement as "energy in action," which connects the person to the activity. They and others (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) distinguished engagement from motivation by pointing out that while a student may be motivated, that does not necessarily lead to engagement. Still others (Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2012), (Doron, Stephan, Maiano, & Le Scanff, 2011), (Van Nuland, Dusseldorp, Martens, & Boekaerts, 2010) believed that the connection between motivated learners and student achievement or (Ciani, Sheldon, Hilpert, & Easter, 2011), (Shu-Shen, 2008) self-determination and student achievement were not unlike those between engagement and student achievement, and often defined those connections very similarly. Could it be that those researchers were trying to identify the same thing while labeling it by different names (e.g., motivated learner, self-determined learner, engaged learner)? "The study of engagement is hindered by lack of consensus in both the number of subtypes and definitions of student engagement" (Reschly, & Christenson,, 2012, p. 11).

Within the studies that purport to measure student engagement, the methodology and instruments vary greatly. Some identify engagement as containing only two domains, such as behavioral and emotional (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Ladd & Dinella, 2009). Others insist that in addition to behavior and emotion, cognitive engagement plays a vital role in the engagement process (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). Hughes, Luo,

Kwok, and Loyd (2008) and Jang (2008) focused on cognitive factors of engagement as the primary predictor of student engagement. Even within the domains, there is disagreement among professionals. Dotterer and Lowe (2011) saw emotional engagement and behavioral engagement as components within a domain identified as psychological, claiming that the factors of each were so similar that they could not be assessed separately. Others saw such unique distinction among variables of engagement; their findings indicated that each domain could evolve independent of the other domains (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). (See Appendix 5 for a chart of types of measurements used.)

While professionals do not agree on one comprehensive definition of engagement there is a consistent belief that engagement has multiple components, both intrinsic and extrinsic.

Relationship of Engagement to Academic Achievement

Attempts to understand the relationship between characteristics of engagement and achievement have been made many times. Unfortunately, as vast as the definitions are, so are the desired measurements of success for each trial.

Dotterer and Lowe (2011) found significant positive correlations between engagement and achievement, but only among non-struggling learners. In their study of more than 1300 children from major metropolitan cities across the United States, they surveyed students and teachers, and performed observations to compare the effects of psychological and emotional engagement against student performance on a standardized assessment. The researchers recognized that the data did not necessarily imply a causal relationship but rather substantiate the connection between higher student engagement

and higher achievement. However, the data did reveal two distinctly different patterns that are of note for future research. First, the data revealed a positive relationship between psychological engagement and classroom context among higher performing students, suggesting that a sense of belongingness and climate of the classroom were contributory if not antecedent to academic performance. Conversely, another data set revealed that among struggling learners a positive relationship existed between classroom context and behavioral engagement, suggesting that a sense of belongingness contributed to student willingness to display engagement-type behaviors, but did not necessarily translate to increased academic performance.

In a related study (Stipek, 2005), researchers surveyed 390 students and their teachers in grades one through five. The study attempted to understand the relationship between social skill development and academic success. Specifically, "relationship with teacher" was strongly correlated with academic success. While not identified by the researchers as a factor of engagement, the connection between a student's personal connection to a school and academic success was clearly illustrated by the researchers.

Jang (2008) conducted a University of Wisconsin study of engagement among college students. He found that providing a rationale prior to the beginning of a lesson, essentially stimulating interest, meant that students not only had improved engagement, but were more motivated, and had a deeper understanding of the material. Jang proposed that his work help substantiate the connection between engaged students and their abilities to demonstrate academic success. That also helped support the notion that engagement can be encouraged and taught: a fundamental premise that validates the need to uncover characteristics of engagement.

In an attempt to understand the value of early student engagement on later school success, Ladd and Dinella (2009) completed a nine-year study, following 383 students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Entry variables were assessed in kindergarten. In first through third grade, engagement variables were assessed, and student performance on achievement assessments was reviewed from their first through eighth grade years. The researchers obtained data about engagement from teacher- and parent- perceptions of student emotional and behavioral engagement. They found that higher achieving students consistently received higher engagement scores earlier on. "It may be the case that, in addition to embracing the student role, children's long-term achievement depends on the degree to which they develop a mindset that favors rather than rejects school, and a behavioral stance that mirrors this orientation (a propensity to approach school rather than avoid school)" (p.204).

Shernoff and Schmidt (2008) found inconsistencies in their measures of the engagement-achievement correlation along racial lines. The researchers used an experience sampling method whereby students carried alarms that went off randomly throughout their days. When their alarms rang, the students wrote about their current activities, their thinking, and their opinions about the activities. The study of more than 500 ethnically diverse high school students suggested considerable differences between views of engagement and reported academic performance. African-American students rated themselves higher in engagement factors and lower in achievement than their white peers' self-assessment. The anomaly was also noted in the home and school environments.

An earlier study (Yair, 2000) used the same sampling method to produce responses from more than 800 students in the sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades. Using only responses obtained during school hours, he found a correlation between academic success and engagement. Interestingly, his research also concluded that often when students were disengaged from academic tasks, they were "engrossed" (p. 256) in external preoccupations. That important finding suggests that most students are engaged, but not necessarily in academic tasks.

Despite the inconsistencies in measurement and definitions, researchers are in agreement that engagement in any form promotes better academic success. In the absence of engagement, students have a high likelihood of becoming disengaged and dropping out of school.

> It may be the case that, in addition to embracing the student role, children's long-term achievement depends on the degree to which they develop a mindset that favors rather than rejects school, and a behavioral stance that mirrors this orientation (a propensity to approach rather than avoid school) (Ladd & Dinella, 2009, p. 204).

Relationship of Engagement to Other Factors

Engagement has also been studied as it relates to other life factors. While the results are not necessarily applicable to academic achievement, such studies illustrate the power of engagement across domains, and strengthen the argument to develop a clearer understanding of engagement in the school setting.

A study by Hirschfield and Gasper (2001) looked at school engagement as a predictor of future delinquency. Their study surveyed fifth through eighth grade students

in an urban school system over a period of five years. The students were asked questions regarding their engagement, attitudes and perceptions towards school Engagement was identified in three domains: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. Emotional engagement was determined by rating how much a student would miss aspects of the school (e.g., principal, teacher). Students rated those aspects on a 1 to 5 Likert scale. Behavioral engagement was assessed by self-identified student study time versus leisure time. Cognitive engagement was identified as the psychological investment in school. Other measures were survey questions on school misconduct, peer and general delinquency, parental control and attachment, family demographics and circumstances. Surprisingly, their results suggested that the emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement factors were loosely correlated. While they did find that improved emotional and behavioral engagement decreased the likelihood of delinquency, the connection between cognitive engagement and delinquency was not as clear. Interestingly, it appeared that students with higher levels of cognitive engagement sometimes sought out misconduct behaviors. The researchers hypothesized that "increased effort and high future performance expectations may also result in frustration and lowered school attachment if improved performance does not result. Increased frustration at school, in turn, may increase delinquency." (p. 16)

Van Ryzein, et al (2009) studied school engagement as it related to adolescent psychological well-being. It was hypothesized that individuals with higher school engagement would maintain a higher degree of hope for the future. Both "hope" and "engagement" were surveyed among three different secondary schools. The study viewed engagement as consisting of two domains: emotional and behavioral. Using a four- point

Likert scale, the students self-reported on factors such as their interest, feelings, and involvement in school. The study found that, while not conclusive, there was a reasonable degree of correlation between "hope" and "engagement," suggesting that peer relationships play a significant role contributing to both.

Several years later, Van Ryzin (2011) investigated engagement and hope again as it pertained to future success. In additions to surveys used in his previous study, Van Ryzin added a survey that included questions about perception of teacher commitment and caring, as well as peer support, with the hope of assessing a sense of school belongingness. More than 400 students from the seventh to eleventh grade were assessed in the spring, and then again one year later. Results of the individual assessments were compared and analyzed. Van Ryzin concluded that engagement and hope were positive predictors of future success. Interestingly, the type of success varied by gender: engagement was a stronger predictor for boys, and hope was stronger for girls.

Though not developed as a school-based model, a survey by Canadian researchers (Ramey, Busseri, Khanna, & Rose-Krasnor, 2010) was given to teens to determine if activity engagement would negatively affect suicide risk. They found that youth who reported organized groups/activities (such as education) as important activities, were at significantly lower risk of suicide than those not reporting an important activity.

Lewis (et al., 2011) sought a connection between student engagement and life satisfaction. Building on earlier research (Frisch et al., 2005), which asserted that life satisfaction predicts higher levels of student engagement in college, Lewis surveyed more than 700 middle school students on measures of life satisfaction, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional engagement. They found varying associations

between life satisfaction variables and each type of engagement, strengthening the argument for engagement to be viewed as having multiple dimensions. While giving credence to that notion, the findings also suggested that cognitive engagement plays a stronger role in life satisfaction then other engagement factors, and life satisfaction, in turn, improves cognitive engagement.

Those studies illustrate the importance of engagement in life outcomes outside of the school environment. That implies that uncovering the characteristics of engagement may have implications beyond the classroom.

DIFFICULTIES WITH MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

As mentioned previously, the varying perceptions of the characteristics that make up engagement make the validity and reliability of measuring tools very difficult. Attempts to quantify engagement have been met with only limited success.

A group of researchers from the University of Minnesota sought to develop a measure of psychological and cognitive engagement. (Appleton et al. 2006) Their work involved a sampling of more than 1900 ninth grade students. Their results indicated that Appleton and others had develop a valid instrument of determining engagement with that population given intrinsic motivators. Unfortunately, the study could not validate or implicate the contribution of extrinsic factors of motivation. Additionally, the tool was not designed to measure engagement as it related to academic success.

A follow-up study (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012) introduced the same measure with age-appropriate adaptations into an elementary setting. The results, while promising, fell short on reliability of measures with younger children. The researchers proposed that younger children may have a hard time distinguishing their

own thinking processes and thus, Carter and others wrote**,** "Unlike older students, elementary-age students may not interpret the subtle distinctions between some SEI (Student Engagement Instrument) items. Instead, when responding to items, younger students may have interpreted them in more concrete terms" (p. 71)

Hughes et al. (2008) identified two dimensions of engagement: effortful and conduct. They relied solely on teacher-rated survey tools to identify student attributes on a five-point Likert scale. Unlike others, the researchers were not concerned with an emotional component to determine a connection to achievement. Predictably, they found that teachers' perceptions of engaged students were in line with achievement outcomes, although little was actually learned about student perception of engagement.

Skinner et al. (2008) took a unique approach in measuring student engagement. The study proposed that student engagement is made up of both behavioral and emotional engagement, as well as their corresponding disaffection factors. The four-year longitudinal approach with fourth through seventh graders revealed a pattern of declining engagement as students progressed into middle school grades. The researchers proposed that the pattern of decline was due to an increase in the disaffection factors of engagement, primarily along the lines of emotion. Skinner and others (2008) found that student interest in a topic, and emotional state, strongly affected the student's quality of engagement. While the study was promising in design, the pattern of decline cannot account for actual decline of engagement, or whether a change in the measurement of engagement is required as children mature.

A study most closely related with that research used a combination of student survey, teacher survey and student interviews to measure engagement (Blumenfeld,

Modell, Bartko, Secada, Fredicks, Friedel, & Paris, 2005) among third through fifth grade students: middle childhood. The two year study involved 660 students the first year and 294 students the second year. Approximately half the students in the second year had been previously surveyed. Each student was interviewed for 30 to 45 minutes. Ninety-two students were interviewed the first year and 46 interviews were conducted the second year. The study applied a person-oriented analysis to see patterns of variables rather than group averages. In an attempt to understand relationships between and among cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement constructs, the study presented confounding results suggesting that engagement in each of those defined constructs develops independently of the others. Despite the inclusion of interviews, Blumenfeld et. al. was able to draw conclusions only about what engaged students do, rather than to identify the common characteristics for engagement. Anecdotal reports were revealed from the interviews, but no attempt was made to place the students in context other than to label them "truly disaffected," "strugglers" and "socially troubled." (pp. 161-164)

Understanding the Role of Behavioral Engagement

As stated earlier, the majority of research refers to three domains of student engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (also known as affective). Reschly and Christenson (2012) define the cognitive domain as a student's perception of the relevance and value of education. The emotional domain is defined as a student's perception of the connectedness of school, which speaks more to the interpersonal relationships than to new academic learnings. Behavioral engagement is observable behavior related directly to the process of learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Though data in the behavioral student engagement domain may be easier to collect than in the

cognitive or emotional domains, current methodologies are reliant on the appearance of engagement. Interpreting observed behavior as a function of overall engagement is problematic for several reasons.

Observed behavioral engagement may be the result of cognitive and/or emotional engagement. Ainley (2012) proposed that student interest in education is an internal mechanism falling within the cognitive domain, suggesting interest drives behavioral engagement outcomes. To that end, "interest processes are significant as they contribute to the overall configuration of a student's behavior" (p. 299). Others (Reschly & Christenson, 2012) theorized that cognitive and emotional (affective) engagement are mediators of behavioral engagement. In other words, the more frequently a student experiences feelings of belonging, school connectedness, value of learning, and relevance of school to future aspirations, the more likely a student will be to display engagement behaviors such as good attendance, participation, and an absence of negative behaviors. Finn and Zimmer (2012) refer to that as the "participation-identification" cycle whereby positive behavior leads to increased connection with school which supports additional positive behavior and so on.

Observed behavioral engagement may be the cause of engagement. This school of thought assumes that a student's behavior drives his/her perceptions of school. Consistent with research (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Stipek, 2005; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Yair, 2000), students that display positive behavioral engagement are more successful in academics than their less academically engaged peers. However, research (Hughes et. al., 2008; Blumenfeld et. al., 2005) that relied on external perceptions of engagement could not explain why the students chose engaged behaviors.

Observed behavioral engagement may be a measurement of engagement, not necessarily a domain of engagement. Lam, Wong, Yang, and Liu (2012) identify the distinction between outcomes and indicators of student engagement. Whereas the former is concerned with student discipline and grades (observed behaviors), the latter is focused on the underlying thought processes that influence behavior. Fundamental to that school of thought is the notion that engagement is a state, not a trait. In other words, student engagement is not the result of a genetic attribute, but, rather, it can be taught (Jang, 2008). By extension, observed behavioral engagement would be a measurement of how well students learn cognitive and emotional engagement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Middle childhood (early elementary school years) is an under-studied student population. Since student engagement is likely to take different forms in the elementary and high school years (Fredericks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004),it is imperative to understand the form it takes during middle childhood so that preventive measure can be taken to avoid disengagement in later years.

Schoeneberger (2012) suggested that disinterest in school is a longitudinal process that occurs over time and manifests itself in outcome variables such as attendance and eventual dropping out of school. “Identifying students on the path to disengagement early is necessary to assist students and their families in identifying why students are not attending school and providing assistance to correct the problem.” (p.13)

Ideally, students beginning their school careers in kindergarten would be interviewed to understand themes of engagement. That is problematic because children in

early childhood are often inaccurate reporters, and often lack the capacity to accurately explain and understand their emotions (Brown & Dunn, 1996).

SUMMARY

The research on the relationship between student engagement and academic achievement presents a confounding problem. While the results of multiple studies report direct correlations between the two, the vast differences of definitions and measurement invalidate any generalizable methodology for understanding the relationship between them. However, one consistent message does come through: with most students, engagement in any form, contributes to future success.

Research on engagement that embraces surveys as the primary source of data relies heavily on paradigms created by adults. Within those paradigms are domains that are defined differently among researchers. Even the characteristics associated with each domain have great variability. While each of the previously noted studies was able to demonstrate some measurement of engagement, each study developed operational definitions and "fit" responses to those definitions. That approach lends itself to contrived results, and possible misinterpretation (or over-interpretation) of the data.

If student engagement is viewed as a personal story of student connection to school (Ainley, 2012), then a qualitative interview would strengthen the ethical argument of providing benefit to the individual being researched (Creswell, 2009). "We can list contextual factors that influence engagement, but thick descriptions of classroom contexts are needed to enhance our understanding of how and why they work." (Fredericks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004, p86)

The lack of thick rich descriptions in the literature on student engagement deters from the foundational tenets on which strategies to improve student engagement can be built. Through exploration in that type of research approach, one of three outcomes will be revealed. The first possible outcome is that the interviews will strengthen arguments about student engagement already in the existing literature. The second possible outcome is that new rationales for student engagement will be revealed through the interviews. The third possible outcome is that the interviews will offer a combination of new and existing rationale for student engagement. This research while not generalizable by design, could offer a richer and deeper understanding of student engagement than could be gained through surveys alone. It is this deeper understanding that could provide a foundation for further research on student engagement.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to uncover elementary students' perceptions about engagement in school, and identify themes of student preferences that may lead to increased engagement. Previous studies of student engagement have been focused on assigning values (e.g., how often do you pay attention in this class?) to characteristics of student engagement defined by the researcher (Marks, 2000; Carter et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2008). Though some studies have sought to identify the validity of the questions, one cannot help but wonder if the questions truly encompass a student's perception of engagement since the topics for questions were not developed by the students themselves.

That might lead one to question whether the engagement factors evaluated in previous studies have actually been a representation of what a successful student does, rather than a representation of predictors of engagement. In other words, are the students identified as highly engaged because they display/report the behaviors expected for highly achieving students, or are the factors for engagement developed independent of any achievement?

"The conceptualization of student engagement as a state instead of a trait is very important because it makes intervention possible and legitimate" (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012, p405). That point is critical because it implies that student engagement can be taught. Although some children may come to school lacking the knowledge to engage, that does not mean that they cannot learn to become engaged.

Fredricks et al. (2004) lists concerns with "the narrow array of methods used to study engagement. Many studies use student and teacher surveys to measure engagement

and classroom context. From this research, we can list contextual factors that influence engagement, but thick rich descriptions of classroom contexts are needed to enhance our understanding of how and why they work" (p. 86)

Rather than imposing a perception of student engagement on a model for research, this research developed a model of understanding engagement through the eyes of the student. This model provides a platform for future research by providing necessary groundwork for developing a long overdue operational definition of engagement. Through the utilization of this model, a comparison can be made between student identified characteristics of engagement and the perceptions of student engagement currently identified in research literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research question 1: What characteristics of engagement are identified by elementary-aged children?

Research question 2: What are the similarities and differences among individual student characteristics (e.g. gender, preferred subjects, etc.) and student-identified engagement?

Research question 3: How do the characteristics of student-identified engagement relate to commonly used adult-identified characteristics present in the research literature?

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

For the reasons identified in the problem statement, namely, the fact that previous studies of student engagement involved measuring students on criteria established by adults, the design of this study was inductive in nature. In an effort to minimize the risk of researcher-imposed paradigms on the students, a qualitative interview design was

appropriate to uncover student perceptions (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013).

In order to capture student perceptions, a qualitative inquiry approach (Creswell, 2009) was taken. That approach separates this study from previous research in that no hypotheses were made prior to the research. To that end, the research was designed to uncover codes to build themes as it emerged from the data using a Constant Comparative method where data segments are continually compared against other data segments to determine similarities and differences. The investigator was the primary instrument for data collection and identified the Core Category, student engagement, central to the themes (Merriam, 2009).

The approach included interviewing students about their perceptions of what engages them in school. An interview can be an effective tool in maximizing children's verbal production and complexity of their language and do not need to be overly long to demonstrate reliability (Heilmann, Debrock, & Riley-Tilman, 2013). Open-ended questions were developed as they tended to yield more information (Korkman, Santilla, Westeraker & Sandnabba, 2007). Care was taken to minimize the number of words in the questions as that too can yield more descriptive responses (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). The topics of inquiry were based on topics of inquiry found in earlier research (Lewis et al. 2011; Hughes et al. 2008; Jang, 2008; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Ryzin et al., 2009; Skinner et al., 2008; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Ladd & Dinella, 2009). (see Appendix 1). The topics of inquiry were used as a place to begin the conversation (e.g. *Describe an assignment or activity you found interesting*.). However, more generalized questions (e.g. *Think of a teacher that has helped you learn a lot. What did*

the teacher do to help you learn?) were also asked to uncover previously unaddressed topics. This approach assisted the researcher in uncovering student perceptions while providing some context for use in comparisons to relevant literature. As a result of multiple interviews with students, common themes of engagement were used as discussion topics to uncover preferences and opinions of student engagement. This multi-tiered approach to uncovering student engagement themes is in stark contrast to previous survey approaches developed by researchers themselves. The interviewer was the key to uncovering themes in this study due to the flexibility of open-ended questions and the ability for the interviewer to ask follow-up and clarifying questions.

SAMPLE

A dearth of work on student engagement has been focused on understanding the engagement of adolescent-aged students. (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Jang, 2008; Yair, 2000; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2001; Ramey et. al., 2010) However, when one considers studies that use early engagement as a predictor of future success (Van Ryzin, et al., 2009, Lewis et al. 2011, Frisch et al., 2005) and that overall student engagement tends to decline as students advance in grades (Marks, 2000), one recognizes that the engagement prior to adolescence may be of greater importance to understanding overall student success.

Interviewing pre-school-aged children about engagement would have been ideal for this study. However, prior to entering school, children are not necessarily exposed to opportunities to participate in communities outside of the family and opportunities to choose to engage in those communities which limit experiences on which to report (Cooper, 2005). Additionally, pre-school children as a test group do not reliably report

emotion and feelings (Brown & Dunn, 1996). With this in mind, the middle-aged child (age 7-11) was the age group selected for this study.

Four children from grades three through five, for a total of twelve, were a unique sampling, purposively selected based on school personnel input (Merriam, 2009). To account for unforeseen difficulties such as student absence, school cancelation, and student refusal, twelve students were initially selected in the hopes that at least nine of them would be able to complete the study.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Individuals selected for this study were students in a public elementary school in grades three through five (ages 7-11). Younger students were not selected because of their limited educational experience, and a likely lack of developmental readiness to offer the type of rich description needed for this research (Brown & Dunn, 1996). Children, age seven to eleven, typically can produce concrete information about their lives with some details about abstract concepts. (Piaget, 1972)

School personnel were asked to select students based on the following criteria. (See Appendix 3: letter to school personnel)

- The student should be willing to talk about their education experiences.
- The student does not necessarily have to be well-behaved or have high academic outcomes. In other words, the student does not have to be a "model" student.
- The student should be capable of voicing an opinion and, to the extent possible, offer supporting arguments.
- The student does not necessarily have to present with strong engagement characteristics.

Seven girls and five boys were initially selected for the study by their teachers. All twelve completed the first interview, however, upon beginning the second round of interviews, one fifth grade girl requested to discontinue her participation. The remaining students, two fifth-grade boys, one fifth-grade girl, one fourth-grade boy, three fourth-grade girls, two third-grade boys, and two third-grade girls, completed all three interviews.

To minimize gender and age biases, the distribution of students' age and gender was as equally weighted as practical. Less weight was placed on adult perceptions of student engagement for this study. As such, it was more important to this research that a child was able to talk about characteristics that engage him or her in school than whether he/she is perceived as engaged. To that end, informal conversations with teachers about their students' engagement were minimal, and no direct quotes were taken.

Research Context

Students were removed from their classroom at a time approved by both school administration and their classroom teachers. The days of the week varied, but teachers were contacted at least three days in advance for times. On multiple occasions, when arriving to classrooms to get students, the researcher was told there was a change of plans but given an alternate time to interview.

The setting was a rural K-5 public elementary school, chosen because rural schools are the most common type of schools in Maine, where the research was being conducted. For an unfamiliar adult to facilitate the interviewing of elementary students, it is essential that students be interviewed in a setting that is familiar and comfortable for them (Saywitz, Camparo, Romanoff, 2010). Interviews were held during the school day

to insure student participation that was not reliant on parent transportation at a time outside of the school day.

DATA COLLECTION

This researcher supported the premise for interviewing students consistent with the other researchers in the field. “Inherent in our theorizing on student engagement is the belief that students are able to accurately report on their own engagement and environments and, further, that their perspectives are integral to the selection, implementation, and monitoring of interventions.” (Reschly & Christenson, 2012, p.9).

In the current study students were interviewed in their natural setting (Cresswell, 2009), their home school. A school conference room was assigned to this researcher for the duration of the study. The room was relatively quiet and free from distractions. It was located in a central corridor, a short walking distance from the students’ classroom.

Much of the research on interviewing children comes from techniques used in medical and legal matters such as diagnosis, divorce, and abuse (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003; Korkman, Santtila, Westeråker, & Sandnabba, 2008; Lindberg, Chapman, Samsock, Thomas, & Lindberg, 2003). Additionally, the field of counseling has several models and techniques specifically designed to provide therapy for children (Landreth, 2012; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). It is from those two fields of research that the techniques were borrowed for this study. The common thread in both fields of research is that the interviewer truly listens to the child and tries to “enter a person’s world as he or she sees it” (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010, p.157)

This researcher used proven techniques from within the field of child counseling to uncover information from children while minimizing the lure of adult interpretation and guided responses.

> "A child is sensitive to the stimuli given by the interviewer, and these stimuli may orientate the child's answers in a certain direction. On the other hand, providing different stimuli is a good way of making sure that answers are consistent. Skill and experience are required to elicit the appropriate answers that actually represent children's points of view. In the end, children certainly know more about what they know than interviewers do. The purpose is to get children to talk about what they know." (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003, p. 440)

While children should have validation that they are being listened to, they do not need explanations or lengthy discourses about their experiences (Landreth, 2012). "The therapist should not bind the child to the therapist's world of reality." (p. 235) To that end, it is important to recognize a child's feelings ("It makes you mad when that happens.") rather than include the researcher's feeling ("That makes me mad too.") or researcher's judgment ("You had every right to be mad."). When turning statements into questions, a researcher should avoid labeling an object or idea ahead of the child.

Student: Math is my worst subject.

Incorrect response: Is it your worst subject because….. or……?

Correct response: Tell me more about that.

Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, (2010) embrace the notion of the client's "story." Uncovering that story requires encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing in effort to

"enable you to communicate to clients that they have been heard" (p151). Additionally, the use of "accurate paraphrasing can help clients complete their storytelling" (p158). Ivey et al. identified four dimensions of paraphrasing:

(1) The *sentence stem* links the client's story to the interviewers understanding of it. (e.g. Mark, what I hear you saying is….. or It sounds like you feel …. when…)

(2) The *keywords* are actual words used by the client to describe their story. (e.g. You mentioned that your teacher was "boring" and "out-of-touch.")

(3) The *essence of what the client has said* in briefer and clearer form.

(4) A *check-out* for accuracy: a summary question following paraphrasing to ensure that paraphrasing was done accurately. (e.g. "Have I got it right?," "Am I hearing you correctly?")

Unlike, counseling children, which involves the use of theoretical constructs to help draw meaning from an interview; this research did not apply a child's story to a conceptual framework, but rather explored the story to help uncover an original framework.

In consideration of other research, three major components of engagement stand out: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioral engagement. In most cases, behavioral engagement is defined as an external measurement. There is a lack of research to support whether observed behavioral engagement is a result of cognitive and/or emotional engagement, the cause of engagement, or merely a measurement, not domain of engagement. For that reason, cognitive (e.g., *What interests you about*…) and emotional (e.g., *How do you feel about*..), engagement were appropriate targets to

investigate when interviewing students for this study. This study did not investigate student behavioral engagement, which would rely on subjective observational data. However, some anecdotal feedback from teachers was gathered on the students.

First the data was collected by *theoretical sampling*, which involved collecting data as the emerging codes and the analysis dictated. Those data were analyzed using the *constant comparative method* of data analysis. That involved continually comparing segments of data to other segments of data for the purpose of finding similarities and differences. Codes for the data were given tentatively and were changed as new data or new relationships among the data emerged. Finally, relationships which frequently appeared in the data were assigned *core categories*. It was those core categories that tied together the data, and provided the framework for hypothesis at the completion of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Data were collected through open-ended question interviews. Initially students were interviewed as to their perceptions of the types of activities, relationships, and feelings around school. Second and third interviews investigated successively more-directed questions in an attempt to establish themes. All students were able to voice perceptions of engagement in the first interview, and thus none were dropped from the study. The data generated from the interviews comprised the students' perceptions of their cognitive and emotional engagements.

Prior to the first interview, it was anticipated that students would be observed in their classroom to help the researcher develop some context for the interviews. However, the first three times the researcher arrived in classrooms, the teacher announced that the

researcher would be taking the students from class. Thus the researcher dropped the observation component with the remaining nine.

Interviews ranged from 17 to 30 minutes in length. They were deliberately kept short since longer interviews may not yield desirable information because of a child's inability to focus. (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003)

Students were interviewed over an eight-week interval between January 2015 and March 2015 which also included a one-week school break. Students were originally scheduled to be interviewed approximately once every 14 days, to complete the three-part series within a 29-day window. That would allow enough time to reflect on each interview, but not enough time to lose connections between them (Seidman, 2013). However, interviews had to be re-scheduled many times due to weather cancellations, state testing, and student absences. As a result, there was an average of 21 days between the first and second interviews, with a range of 7 to 30 days. Time between the second and third interviews averaged 15 days, with a range of 10 to 23 days. To re-establish connections on succeeding interviews, the researcher began each successive interview with informal conversations about the student's hobbies and activities.

Given the themes generated after the third set of interviews, a review of relevant research was compared for similarities.

In pursuit of uncovering themes of student engagement unveiled by students themselves, semi-structured interview questions led to a more natural sharing of information uninhibited by the confines of a survey or a student's literacy skills (Merriam, 2009). With the exception of one student, there were two follow-up interviews for each

student in an effort to clarify and further uncover themes. A cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009) was completed to develop comparisons across participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

In an effort to capture student perceptions for appropriate data analysis, the following protocol was used.

(1) Prior to each interview, students were introduced to the researcher in their regular classroom setting. No data about engagement characteristics were collected at that time.

(2) For each interview, a digital audio recording was made using a digital recorder. The recordings were identified by student initials.

(3) The audio recordings were transcribed, paying close attention to pauses, noises, and repetition. Interviews were filed according to initials, and accessible only by a researcher-controlled password.

(4) The researcher included observation notes of non-verbal responses with the transcription. (e.g., "She seemed visibly upset when she answered that question.")

(5) Transcriptions were entered into Dedoose, a qualitative coding software package

(6) Interesting passages were bracketed in the transcription. Specifically, data that appear heuristic was identified in the least number of words necessary. (Merriam, 2009)

(7) Passages were coded and grouped into categories.

(8) Discrepant data was reviewed, and attempts were made to clarify questions prior to the following interview.

(9) Steps 1 through 5 were repeated for each interview, and then all interview data were combined.

(10) Seventy-four codes were used initially and later changed to sixty-six codes to better represent the data. More than two thousands codes were identified from approximately eleven and one-half hours of interviews.

(11) Thematic traits among the codes were identified to create twenty-two categories. From those categories, themes emerged. The remaining discrepant data is discussed in Chapter Five.

(12) Proposed themes were testing against the data by looking if the theme was truly represented throughout the data. When themes could not be substantiated, steps 7 and 8 were repeated. Three themes emerged as having met this test.

(13) Interview excerpts that offered the most compelling description of themes were identified.

(14) As themes began to emerge through triangulation, questions were refined for succeeding interviews. Final student interviews were coded. A cross-case analysis was performed to look for similarities and differences among the responses. The results were compared against the literature review to understand the differences and similarities in perceptions about student engagement.

To uncover how the perceptions of student-identified engagement were similar or dissimilar to commonly used adult-identified perceptions present in the research literature, the researcher reviewed themes present in research literature, and compared them against the themes revealed through interviews. In understanding whether the themes designed by adults are similar to the themes revealed through the interviews, the researcher reviewed commonalities and differences among the themes in research, focusing mainly on themes associated with students beliefs around school instead of themes associated with outcomes.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

The researcher brings more than twenty years of experience working with children in an educational setting. In the current role of school administrator, he has extensive experience interviewing children in all grades about their likes, dislikes, concerns and accomplishments in the school setting. He is firmly committed to the notion that children are the best reporters of their own experiences and hold the key to understanding what keeps them engaged at school.

At least three students were interviewed per grade-level to provide opportunity for the triangulation of themes (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). That allowed for the possibility of drawing themes among grade level, gender, and the entire group.

To the extent possible, member checking (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) was applied to determine the accuracy of the findings. However, that was problematic for two reasons. First, the length of the transcription and reading ability could have impaired a child's ability to reflect on meaning. Secondly, despite the researcher's attempt to set a child at ease, it is likely that the child might have become intimidated by the questioning

process and answer “to please” rather than provide accuracy (e.g. You said that you didn’t like “A,” is that what you meant to say?). In an effort to avoid those problems, the researcher attempted to address the reliability of findings through follow-up interviews, restating earlier questions in an attempt to get a similar response.

Findings are reported through the use of thick, rich descriptions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Child self-reporting is problematic due to limitations in life experiences, ability to articulate those experiences accurately, and ability to sustain conversation (Teachman & Gibson, 2012; Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003).

Not all students selected for the study chose to complete all three interviews. The impact of that limited the ability to obtaining verifying statements and depth of interview for that individual.

Some students may not have been selected for the study because of their disengagement. Students who are already disengaged can offer valuable information to the study but unfortunately may not accurately report due to disengagement or due to the fact that their teachers may perceive them as students who would not be appropriate for the study. Interviewing already disengaged students would have helped develop a more developed comparison with engaged students.

Though the researcher does not work in the school district used for the study, there was still the potential that students and teachers might have had at least some familiarity with the interviewer because it is a small community, which may have impacted the responses.

Since this study revolved around the interviewing of children, parent permission was sought. It is reasonable to think that there are children who are excellent reporters but were unavailable because parent permission could not be obtained. Since permission was obtained through the school, the researcher was not told of the children whose parents did not give permission.

Despite the use of a research-based interview protocol, a researcher can still in avertedly impact some student responses. Similarly, for some children, past experiences may influence them to answer questions in effort to please the interviewer rather than offer truthful insight (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003)

Because the researcher is an adult, his impact on the design of the questions and final interpretations cannot be entirely exempt from adult influence. Many of the techniques described in the methodology section are designed to minimize that impact.

W.C. Fields was known for his remark, "never work with children or animals." The difficulty existing with the former means certain unpredictability in the interviews. The study design attempted to plan for variability of responses with a multiple interview approach. The need for this researcher to seek university review and oversight limited the ability to engage in more natural conversations as might be afforded in an adult interview. While those protections are in place to minimize potential harm to children, they also limit the ability to redirect conversations "on the fly" and as a result, rich data may not be uncovered.

DELIMITATIONS

- Students below the age of seven were not assessed due to their immature language development and developmental locus of control.

- The sample size was small due to time constraints of obtaining multiple interviews and represented only individuals within a small rural school district. Additionally, the benefit of the sample size was that time could be given to give in-depth interviews.
- The needs of children who live in poverty may be different from the needs of children who do not live in poverty, thus, the characteristics of school engagement may be different. Since poverty was not identified as a selection factor for participants, it was not examined in this study.
- Interviewing as opposed to observation was selected as the tool for data collection in an effort to understand student perceptions, not adult observed interpretations. Although, some observations took place in the study, the purpose was not to draw data regarding engagement but rather give context for interview questions.

ROLE OF RESEARCHER

Researchers agree that the validity of interviewing children can be directly related to interactions with the interviewer. For this reason, this researcher followed guidelines for interviewing children identified by Saywitz, Camparo, and Romanoff (2010).

(1) Provide an age-appropriate, private environment with minimal distractions.

While the researcher had little control over the room used within the school setting, a request was made with the cooperating district to provide such a space. The space provided had adequate lighting, heat, and atmosphere conducive to the interview process.

(2) *Prepare children with age-appropriate explanations of the purpose of the interview, the child's role and the function of the professionals.*

As part of the interview protocol, each interview began with a description of the above. The researcher was introduced as a college student who was trying to develop a better understanding of student's likes and dislikes around school. He did not bring attention to his professional role in education to avoid intimidating students or affecting responses (Seidman, 2013). It was explained that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. (Rich, 1968)

(3) *Create an objective, non-judgmental atmosphere where children's perceptions are explored and respected.*

That was accomplished by depending on the child to explain the important point; the researcher summarizing in the child's own words and asking clarifying follow-up questions.

(4) *Make an effort to establish rapport through non-suggestive means.*

Children were given permission to say, "I don't know." or "I don't understand." They were given permission to ask for a break or say they are uncomfortable answering a question (Teachman & Gibson, 2013). "Children, in particular, may require considerable help from the interviewer before they are willing to share at all." (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquet, 2010, p109)

(5) *Promote a supportive, welcoming, non-threatening atmosphere.*

This researcher engaged in complimenting the child on effort without giving affirmation or disapproval (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). Examples: "That's a very detailed answer." and "It sounds like you have thought a lot about that."

(6) Match the demands of the interview to the child's stage of development. Use language children comprehend and concepts children understand.

Since children often answer questions they do not understand, it can lead to a misinterpretation of their responses (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). Interview questions were piloted with a group of similar aged children to check for understanding. Similarly, if children's answers seemed to indicate that the question was not understood, the question was re-worded and checked for understanding.

(7) Establish conversational ground rules and shared expectations with practice narratives and instructions.

Research suggests that given the opportunity to try a practice narrative, children are able to produce longer and richer responses on questions of inquiry (Saywitz, Geiselman & Bornstein. 1992; Sternberg et al. 1997) Prior to beginning questions about engagement, children were prompted to tell the researcher to give a summary of a book they had read or a movie they had watched. The children were prompted, "Tell me more."; "What happened next?"; "Can you share some more detail about…?" All of the children did that with ease.

(8) *Engage children in conversations on a wide range of topics germane to the decision making process.*

Essential to the process of understanding a child's reason for engaging, is that preferences are revealed naturally, not by being led or given a list of possible answers. Patterns of answers were given greater weight than single answers to uncover themes and develop clarifying questions.

(9) *Use general open-ended , non-leading questions that call for multi-word responses whenever possible; invite children to elaborate in their own words.*

Except for clarifying questions, children were not typically asked questions with yes/no answers. However, some yes/no question were designed as a lead-in to the question requiring more thoughtful response. (e.g. *Do you ever have trouble paying attention at school? Tell me what that is like for you? For others?*) Questions were open-ended with minimal adjectives, and required multi-word answers. Clarifying questions asked students to explain their reasoning more completely, and defend their answers with examples.

(10) *Finally, avoid suggestive techniques that mislead, introduce bias, reinforce interviewer expectations, apply peer pressure, stereotype people, or invite children to pretend or speculate.*

This research adhered to the recommendation made above with the exception of speculation. Inherent to the process was empowering the

students to value their own engagement. To that end, children were asked to speculate on what a better school experience could be like.

Critical to the success of this research was avoiding the trap of interpreting data through the "adult lens." That was considered in three areas: research design, research implementation, and data analysis.

In research design, the adult "lens" was limited through research of the most common practices of interviewing children. Among the most crucial of those practices was the design of questions that were neither leading nor limiting. It involved creating questions that used language appropriately understood by the child with a minimal amount of words. Such practices are commonly used in the field of counseling and psychiatry.

In research implementation, controls were put in place to minimize the researcher's influence on responses. Non-judgmental comments (e.g. "I see," "Thank you," "You seem to have thought a lot about that.") were used to encourage responses while neither approving nor disapproving of the response. This researcher's role was to clearly identify himself as someone who wanted to know more about a child's education. That was important to avoiding the impression that what a child may say would get him/her into trouble. To avoid later over-interpretation of the interviews, points were clarified and re-stated in both the positive and negative to verify a student's true meaning.

In the data analysis, great care was taken to avoid interpretation through the researcher's pre-conceived paradigms. First, the data were screened for anomalies and consistencies. Where patterns of answers could not be easily identified, data were discarded, since use of the data may have led to mis-interpretation. Next, the data were

coded for similar statements. Triangulation of responses among students was used to identify common themes. The researcher placed more emphasis on thick rich description and context of comments than on interpretation of language used.

Operational Definitions

Elementary students (students in middle childhood) were defined as students in the third, fourth, or fifth grade, within the ages of 7 to 11 years.

Semi-structured interviews were defined as a series of open-ended questions designed to uncover a student's perceptions of their school experiences, their relationships in schools, and the impacts of both.

Natural setting was defined as a room in the school which the student normally attends.

Student Engagement was defined as the cognitive and emotional characteristics that inspire a student to attend, participate, invest, and learn in school.

First Pilot

As part of a school district initiative to find out what keeps students engaged in school, school administrators in a rural Maine district had informal conversations with students in spring 2013. Those students were simply asked to talk about their likes at school, and what was fun for them. Administrators took notes and compared their notes against those of other administrators. Common themes emerged that were worth exploring further. Students identified "projects" as more "fun" than other types of work. They recalled situations where they were able to work with peers. They shared how they were treated by their teachers. From that information, a list of questions was created to explore engagement in more depth. Students were selected by their classroom teachers as

individuals who would be willing to talk about their educational experiences. Each current school administrator and two retired school administrators was assigned three students to interview in a school where they did not work. Twenty one students in grades three through grade eight were interviewed. A description of the interview was sent home to parents along with consent for the interview. Parents were allowed the option of previewing the questions and/or listening to a recording of the interview.

Lessons Learned from the Pilot

Each interviewer brought their own style and biases to the interviews. Despite some common training around interviewing, there was great variability in interviewer technique. Some stuck to the questions, while others interpreted questions in their own words. In some cases, that led to leading questions, or offering the students multiple choice answers. Interpretation is difficult because it would be difficult to determine if student answers were truly their own insights. In other cases, interviewers keen to establish clarity of an answer, interrupted students and thus may have impacted the richness of their responses

- One interviewer should interview all students offering consistency of interviewing style.
- The sample should be reduced from grade 3-8 to grade 3-5 which is a more uniform cognitive grouping.
- Questions used in the first interview should be reviewed for ease of understanding among third through fifth grade students. Difficult wording will be replaced.
- Questions that do not generate responses pertaining to student engagement will be removed or reworded. Additional questions will be developed to further uncover

student perceptions about engagement topics commonly addressed in the literature.

- Students will be interviewed multiple times to clarify and uncover ideas in deeper detail.

SECOND PILOT

A second pilot was attempted in an effort to solidify the questions for understandability and offer consistency. Two students were interviewed and the conversations were coded for themes.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SECOND PILOT

(1) The question battery was too short. Consistent with the literature on interviewing children, their responses were often short and used minimal words. To facilitate richer answers, a number of follow up probes were developed for each question.

(2) The language of the questions was not always understood as intended. For example, the when asked about "activities" they enjoyed at school, the students would respond with action activities such as running or playing outside. When "activities" was replaced with "assignment" and the question was prompted by an explanation of an "assignment," a clearer answer was given, one that more specifically addressed the research question.

(3) The order of the questions was changed to reflect a more natural discussion. Initially, the questions were disjointed and did not flow. Changing the order seemed to yield provided a more relaxed free-flowing conversation that elicited detailed responses.

(4) Though far from conclusive, the coding revealed the following themes.

- Students were certain and consistent about how they felt about school, be it positive or negative.
- Students were quick to identify preferential subjects of study.
- Spending time with friends was a reoccurring theme.
- While "fun" was used consistently, the individual definitions according to activities varied.
- "Favorite" teachers included some atypical descriptors such as "mean." "strict," and "pushes us."

STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

Previous research on uncovering factors of student engagement has been limited to the use of survey instruments. Survey methodology assumes that the questions are exhaustive and provides the respondent opportunity for complete expression of the idea. While survey methodology is not entirely without merit, it is likely a false assumption that could lead to false conclusions. In this research, it would have been difficult to avoid adult bias in the development of a survey and thus, in avertedly sway a child's opinion or limit the choice of answers. Similarly, because of the age of the sample population, limited vocabulary and/or reading ability could have impeded their abilities to convey rich descriptions through a survey.

The current study used semi-structured interviews accompanying a strict research-based interview protocol to minimize interviewer influence and maximize potential of original dialogue.

Using children in middle childhood as the primary source of information unveils the possibility of uncovering engagement characteristics prior to adolescence. That is

important because studies suggest that disengagement during the middle childhood years leads to unsafe and/or undesirable life choices in adolescence. (Dotterer & Lowe, 2010; Ladd & Dinella, 2009)

CHAPTER 4: REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

What characteristics of engagement are identified by elementary-aged children?

Throughout the course of the interviews, it became quickly apparent that students defined engagement in terms of whether they were having “fun” in school.

Paul shared, “I think it's easier to think while doing or playing something you like.” Fun was a commonly used descriptor in school. To the extent that “fun” impacted engagement, questions were asked to investigate student perceptions of “fun.” Students gave at least seven descriptive statements about fun. Eight students indicated that "fun" is defined by being with peers: "it was just fun...you got to choose partners.,” "see your friends,” "you get to talk with them,” "we play every day together,” “getting to learn with my friends,” "I most likely…like to do it with my friends.… because they… they make it more fun.,” “I really like gym and recess because you get to run around and have fun with your friends,” and "You could start like a game… like make it game and it has to do with math of course.” Three other students did not expressly identify peers as being the definition of "fun," but rather identified specific activities that seemed to imply the inclusion of peers: " we sometimes get to do art and sometimes music in the… in the middle of class,” "I bet that would be really fun like doing like a little play about Christopher Columbus,” and “we have a party.”

Nine students defined activities as fun if they included some type of creative process (e.g., writing, building, drawing): "We got to make a ...town and I made an ice cream shop,” "it's very fun to do… because you get to like research and use a computer and stuff… and you get to build out of whatever you want,” "our lessons could be

more… be more hands-on...active," " it was pretty fun… I'd like to drawing out stuff about cavemen… I mean Vikings," "it's a bit fun sometimes… cause you get to kinda sketch something," "made like little houses and people and then we went outside and brought some twigs and leaves and dead-end stuff in," "last year we had to make a diorama," "you get to do like little experiments sometimes.," and "an independent book project, and we had a book that we read like and you have to do a project on it ."

While "fun" appeared important to students, "fun" did not appear to always be associated with play, though there were references to "play" by most of the students: "we play games and that's the fun about it," "I like playing outside," "I want to ride my bike at recess," "Play X-box with my friends," "if there's dodge ball I'll probably play that," "my Legos," "I like to learn by doing like doing activities… like games and stuff," "I like to play outside at recess with my school… with my friends," "skate for a while…(before) I like to do all my school stuff because I feel better and it just helps me think better," and "'I like to have friends over and play together ."

In analysis of the student interviews, five major themes emerged as the underlying "fun" in school.

THEME 1: HOW STUDENTS THINK AND FEEL ABOUT SCHOOL IMPACTS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL.

Consistent with past research, students were the best reporters of their experiences. Students in this study were able to vocalize not only the things that impact the way they feel about school, but also the things that impact the way they think about school. Statements made by students suggest that they think about being given choices, and making them in school; their feelings in school each day and the reasons behind those

feelings; difficulties they experience in school; the best and worst ways for them to learn; their likes and dislikes about subjects and activities; their perception of other students; and the overall impact of school on their lives.

Stacy commented, “Yeah at the beginning of each semester they (teachers) will say to each (student) “What do you want to learn?” then they won't tell you what they want to learn.” Student ability to choose was investigated to understand its relevance to engagement. This topic was relevant to this study since “choice” is often thought of as the key to helping students establish a personal connection to an assignment or lesson. When asked about the importance of being able to choose in school, one student expressed ambivalence about it. Nine students expressed an affirmative statement. "Well I think choosing is important and I'm happy that our teacher gives us times to choose,” "why would I need math when I grow up…I wouldn't choose math,” "it's actually really fun to choose stuff,” "I think that it is important,” "Choosing…it’s kinda important for me because…I like… I want to get a good path ,” "if you didn't have a choice of what you were going to do then everyone had to do the same thing... or had to do the same book and everything... you might have a lot of people to pick the same thing...and it would really boring,” "we are living in a place that we are allowed to do our right… so that's why I like this country because we can choose what we want to do,” "I want classrooms I can control not lectures I have to sit through,” and " it is important to me because sometimes I like… to have fun in school but that's not exactly what school is all about.”

Most students shared that choice is not frequently offered but when it is, it is offered in a variety of ways: ability to choose an academic task; ability to choose materials used for the academic task; ability to choose the product for completing the

academic task; and ability to choose the method for attempting the academic task. Five students identified the ability to choose an academic task: "We get to choose… if we want to read or do our handwriting book," "after we read... we get to choose (the related movie) and then we watch the movie," "Either it was bingo, or the teacher read aloud or um...us doing fluency friends," "You can choose if you want to read or write," and "they really let you do whatever."

Five students identified the ability to choose materials for the academic task: "It's a book that I picked out," "she showed me some books that I might like to read and I chose this one," "we get to choose a new book," "I chose this book," and "We had to pick a book from our SSR, Silent Sustained Reading."

Five students identified the ability to choose a method for attempting the academic task: "if I want to multiplication or division," "I got to choose when I wanted to write my story about," "writing, we get to choose (the topic)," "on ecosystems which we did once, there was that...we get to scan through books if we find something like (peer) would say, 'Hey look, we should write this down'," and "we did get through in science… well we did on… this thing it was states of matter where we got to build a house of cards. We got to build it however we wanted," and "I had a list of choices (of writing topics)."

Three students identified the ability to choose the product for the academic task: "you get to build out of whatever you want," "and got to pick how you wanted to do it," and "an independent book project… and you can do anything with it… like."

Two students, both boys, expressed that they were able to choose partners for activities " it was just fun… you got to choose partners… I got (peer name)… and we

made a washing machine in the house… we made an airship… we made the kids… it was sort of a play except without the costumes" and "you get to pick who you want to partner up with."

Still students expressed that choice is not always necessary. Ten of the students were able to identify situations in school where they were not given a choice. Six of the students seemed okay with the lack of choice in those situations: "The teacher picked it for me…and then I started reading "Harry Potter" books. I'm on the fourth book," "It was chosen by the teacher to read to the class. (Did you like it?) Uh-huh.," "The teacher chose it…. I loved it," "most times our teacher would have an assignment for us we could do without using but that's still fun," "I like to choose but sometimes I don't get to and that's perfectly fine," and "our social studies teacher... she picked out of the 1,2,3 that we picked. She picked for me Robert E. Lee….I just thought that was really interesting."

Three students stated the lack of choice but did not offer an opinion about it: "Maybe…. I can't really remember if there was a time," "The teacher chooses books for us to read at snack time," and "math we do not get to choose." One student offered that a lack of choice was difficult: "I just don't like being the fact that I get told what to do… like that just sometimes annoys me a lot."

Jon shared, "It also feels a bit like....like a bit old...like I kinda like...bored like" When asked to describe an average school day, eleven students expressed their feelings about an average school day as in, "People are being nice to me.," "I'm always happy." "Every day is going well for me" and "pretty much almost every day… I'm usually happy or very anxious and sometimes very, very depressed." However, seven of those students

expressed feeling that seem to imply disinterest in on a typical day: "sometimes it's exhausting," "Weird," "It's kind of fun but it can get boring sometimes when you just sat there for a while," "It's very frustrating because I'm trying to pay attention," and "We have a crazy day which [happens] most every day."

However, when asked about their feelings about school, most of the students stated more positive words associated with school than negative. On each day of the three interview days, students were asked how they felt about school on that day. Five students used words associated with negative feelings: worried, lonely, tired, depressed, anxious, bored (three times), nervous, frustrated (twice), and angry. There was no pattern of gender or grade associated with those descriptors. Eleven students used words associated with positive feelings: happy (thirteen times), excited (six times), confident (three times), good (two times), pretty good, pretty well, energetic, hope, hopeful, hysterical, fun, and real.

Seven students identified the act of learning or an educational activity as the reason for their feelings about school: "I feel confident about school...because I love learning… except for math," "I feel happy is because it… it's on Wednesdays for example I love Wednesdays because of my two favorite subjects with my two favorite teachers," "Bored...Math tests. Waiting to go back to my classroom," "I feel a little nervous...because… now the DRAs are starting to come in... I need to be in a level 40 but I am a level 38," "I feel actually really excited today...because I love to learn. I love to embrace my talent. I love my teachers. I love my friends. I love everything about school," "Happy...Because I usually learn something new every day," and "Probably hopeful...we

have a math test we have to take… and I feel like I'm going to do really good. That I'm hopeful about."

Conversely, a similar number of students expressed the reason behind their feelings about school was also because of non-school-related reasons: "I'm sort of a teeny bit lonely...because I wish my parents were here," "I'm very happy...Well I just have good days but if I wake up on the wrong side of my bed, you do not want to see my bad side," "very excited...because today is a half-day, when I get home my mom's going to teach me how to do some things with crocheting and stuff," "Less frustrated, more bored...because sometimes I just want to get away from school for a while… like we have to go through a whole week and we only have two days off that feel like one day," "I feel a little nervous...because there's a lot of things I have to do because my cousins are like… I don't really get to see them that much but this week they're here so… now they're starting to get a little bit buggy… because they're like really loud when I'm trying to do my homework," "I feel a bit energetic...because I'm having some oranges and I had some bacon, eggs and a bagel this morning," and "I feel good...'cause I get to have fun after school."

Jeff reflected, "It's hard to store things in your mind, like so many things… like it's going to explode…trying to remember so many things at once" Students were able to talk about things that were difficult in school. All students identified some level of difficulty with paying attention in school. Eight students identified a difficulty that appeared to indicate a level of self-control: "It's like..It's less painful. And um..sort of feels like..like you did a bad thing. It feels like you really turned your back on your teacher. It feels like you left her somewhere," "sometimes if I'm really not paying

attention in math and I'm daydreaming but I look like I'm paying attention and I have to write down math problems but I'm really not paying attention." "If it's a boring topic for me, I'll probably be less interested and I won't pay attention as much but if it's a topic I really enjoy, I'll be right into it." "It's just because some of the stuff I already know." "Something that like catches my eye. Something interesting," "I sometimes daydream," "ADHD. And it made it hard for me to pay attention," and "if I don't have something to fiddle with it is so hard to focus."

Seven students were able to identify strategies to use to help them pay better attention . "If you're learning fractions you have to look because it is easy to remember… I mean, easy to forget," "'Focusing which I don't really do much," "I sometimes have to bring anything like…a thing that I have to squeeze together to give my focus to the teacher," "Just like ignoring the background sound," "'if you really love to learn… that's how you pay attention," "if there's somebody fooling around or like moving all over the place…. or trying to make me laugh…. I would just try to look away and pay attention," and "that's why have a ring because I have to fiddle with something to focus on it."

Most students made comments that suggest their learning is difficult in school. Ten students made comments that suggest that their learning is difficult in school: "my teacher asks a question and I'm like 'I forgot that.' That's what makes it hard too," "I feel a little nervous because… now the DRA's are starting to come in I need to be in a level 40 but I am a level 38," "so much work here… you have to do it for like eight hours… and it's like proves the only thing you're doing is writing down in your hands… like it needs a break," "If that teacher does not give you a full understanding and if they give you a paper that you did not learn about at all," and "when there's like something

that doesn't make sense… it's like a big word that I don't get… it just makes it hard." It is of note that the other five students referred to "math" as an area of difficulty: "if it's just a really, really hard problem and I can't figure it out," "we learn and it just seems like so much that kids might get like headaches and stuff like that after so much math.," "math tests," "it's hard when you get up to like nine. When you're trying to do like nine divided by eight.," and "math...kinda my weakest subject."

Students shared strategies that suggested they understand how they best remember things. Eleven students were able to identify at least one strategy that helps them remember. These strategies included repetition, projects, songs, and games. .

Five students implied that seeing something again helped with their memory: "if you're learning fractions you have to look because it is easy to remember… I mean, easy to forget.," "Looking at papers… like papers that I did before." "Oh I'm going to remember and I remember every time I see (the movie)," "I have to look at something to learn," and "I had to go back and I have to take the test again after I watched a couple of videos so that I would understand it." Four students implied that if they repeated an activity, it was easier to remember: "if you keep doing it again and again and you keep thinking about it," " Doing it over again a few times," "Because it gave me a little refresher on my memory," and " it seems like what we do is things that we learn… we tried to do it as much as we can so you don't forget it."

Four students implied that a applying rhythm to a fact, as in a song or poem, make things easier to remember: "'Like you could make up a rhyme to remember it," "making a poem….or a little jingle," "Okay we're going to Sing-a-Song…like we're going to sing

a song to remember this," and "'Like putting it in your head in a fun way that you'll remember… like a song or like a fun fact."

There were no apparent additional patterns to other student responses to memory, but as indicator of student understanding, they are worth mentioning: "Doing a craft or project on it… That really helps me," "talking about it," and "writing it down."

Sean shared, "I'm not sure but I think it is because I settle in." Students were asked to reflect on the best time and worst times for their learning. Most students were able to identify a time of day that they preferred to do their least-favorite and favorite subject. Ten students were able to identify a time of day that they preferred to do their least-favorite subject. Half of the students preferred to do it in the morning: " in the morning because I just want to get over with it.," "Cause if there's something that we don't really want to do then we probably just want to get it done with… get it over with," "That would usually be in the start of the morning right when we get in or at recess.," "Because I'm more awake in the morning," "we do it do it in the morning… but that's because I like to get it over with." Half of the students preferred the afternoon: " after novel" (in the afternoon)," "my least favorite subject is right before recess so I think it would be better in the afternoon," "after lunch because then I can like still do it… like better.", "Usually it would be at the end of the day," "I think the best time of the day will be like right after silent reading." (in the afternoon).

Three students identified the best time to learn as the best time to do their favorite subject: "in the afternoon because I am woken up/um..afternoon...because I am awake.," "in the morning you're more active/more like in the morning because we're like all perky

in the morning," and "I think that I learn the most which is around 11:30 which is when we do math/I would rather have math at… towards the end of the day."

Three students identified their best time to learn as the best time to do their least-favorite subject: "I usually will learn the best after recess and lunch/ my least favorite subject is right before recess so I think it would be better in the afternoon." "Right when I get to school because I'm all awake./ Right before school end" (is the worst time), and "in the morning/we do it do it in the morning… but that's because I like to get it over with."

Two students could not identify their best time to learn. Two students, both fourth-grade girls, identified the best time to learn as the best time to do their favorite subjects and their least-favorite subjects: "after lunch because then my stomach is full and I can get back to work/After lunch because I can't work on an empty stomach./after lunch because then I can like still do it like better." and "In the morning/right before recess… when I can get my energy that I like… have out and um… it's almost… then it'll be almost lunch/the morning."

While the responses suggested a consistency of understanding from individuals ["I'd rather have reading (favorite subject) in the morning" and "my least favorite subject is right before recess so I think it would be better in the afternoon"], there was no pattern between individuals or subgroups.

Worth noting is the pattern of answers suggesting that the amount of energy or sleep at certain time times of the day affected their abilities to learn. Six students shared: "In the afternoon because I am woken up," "like it lets you relax for enough time so you have some energy to go outside," "In the morning because you are so active so you want to do stuff that you want to do instead of not," "it kind of it gets my brain going a lot

and… then it kind of messes up other topics I feel like," "Because I'm more focused and its before lunch when everyone's kind of not as energized," and "Right when I get to school because I'm all awake."

The researcher asked, "Didn't you tell me you don't like doing math?" Amy replied, "Yes. I'm also gifted in it." Predictably, students expressed a range of subject preferences (e.g., math, reading, science) and preferable methods of learning about those subjects (e.g., projects with others, choice of product, learning through video). Six students (third and fourth-graders) expressed an interest in math instruction: "Watch math videos, like funny math videos," "this huge math book of like… but it's like third-grade but it looks pretty hard…it's like fourth-grade stuff," "I would also miss multiplication," "I think like... rockets in math," "we would have big, big, big problems and it's very fun to solve them," and "You never know what's the problem until you solve it. It's kind of like a mystery."

Six students expressed an interest in reading: "silly books and having picture books," "well, I like reading," "I love reading...I like it how it has parts. It's a kind of adventure and a bit dramatic… like a dramatic adventure.," "I would do the book project...It helps me visualize what it is about," "it just sucks me into a book and I just can't stop reading it… but other times if it's a book that doesn't make 100 percent sense… then I may stop reading it but and if there's a book like it but does make sense… I will read that one," and "an independent book project… and you can do anything with it like."

Five students expressed an interest in science: "I want to learn about space," "A diorama… and I took a big shoe box and I put everything I learned about the plants… the animals… their adaptations. I think it was actually a really fun way to learn about it.," "I

want to know how the earth was formed," "I think it's fun to learn about the environment and the things around it," and "I have a lot of favorite subjects. My most favorite would be science class."

Six students expressed an interest in social studies: "so there's this (history) presentation…, they helped us do the mural…. and (teacher) helped us practice the presentation," "watching funny social studies video," " I love history. It's just been my passion for a long time," "liked doing the timeline," and "I think history is good."

Five students expressed an interest in using computers or electronic devices: "I would type on the computer," "I might try to have fun playing a few games on my laptop," "I would at least like school more if they would let all electronics," "I will bring my computer so we could play 'Just Dance 4'," and "you get to type."

Four students (third- and fourth-grade girls) expressed an interest in Art: "like to draw," "I wish I could learn more about stuff in art and stuff," "outside the classroom, I love to do art," and "I love to do different types of art."

Three students expressed an interest in physical education (gym): "'Well, sometimes we do like... sometimes we have fun." "Gym and PE…Well… it is the most interesting to me because you learn how to do stuff that you wouldn't normally learn. You get to like do it… you don't have to like…. you get to watch and don't… just hear what you're going to do."

Four students expressed an interest in writing: "I like writing because I like thinking of fantasy or thinking of real things," "it's like putting your mind on a piece of paper… because… and it's like my only… one of my only times to like be creative in front of people… because doing crafts, I don't really think is that creative," "I do this

thing after school call and it's called the writers club," and " there's a booklet that's like that big and you have to fill things out about it like you have to do a little summary about it and I think that's really fun."

Amy shared, "I feel confident (about school) …because I love learning…except for math." Students' perceptions of "school" and perceptions of "learning" varied. To understand how student perceptions of "school" compared to the perceptions of "learning," in one interview students were asked to give three words to describe school. In a later interview, students were asked to give three words to describe learning. Both questions were asked late in the interviews so that students had previously had an opportunity to discuss the subjects at length. Eleven students were able to respond to both questions. Many answers were repeated among respondents. Responses for either school or learning classified as positive were: "fun," "cool," "kind of like a journey," "helpful," "Interesting," "wild," "happy," "easy," "to stay on topic learning," "educational," "seeing what you learn," "nice," "clean," "fantastic," "I see my friends," "excited(ing)," "sweet." "educated(ing)," "friendly," "inspiration," "awesome," "good to be around." and " I'm trying to think of the word that would mean like 'you learn a lot' ."

Responses for either school or learning classified as negative were: "boring," "exhausting," "confusing (ed)," "long," "not as great as I thought it was going to be," "hard," "lots of it," "tough," "annoying," "crowded," "crazy," "bitter," and "scary."

While there were many similarities in the positive and negative words used to describe school and learning, in whole, students associated more negative comments towards learning than school. Similarly, students associated more positive comments with school than they associated with learning.

Jean reflected, “If you say you got taught by a friend or something…. you wouldn't really know because they didn't learn…. they could've just learned it at school but it could be…. they could be stretching the truth.” Students were able to differentiate between activities in which they preferred to work alone and activities in which they preferred working with others. Eleven students made between one and four statements supported their preference for working alone, whereas, the same students made at least eight statements about working with others.

When asked to describe the best part about working alone, six respondents indicated working alone would not require them to have to explain or wait for peers to catch up: "you don't have someone that you have to constantly check up on and make sure they have everything written down in the same way and you can just do it by yourself,” “because no one has to say 'come on we got a hurry' all the time,” "you can go at your own speed and not like sitting there like most of the time just waiting for your friend to catch up with you,” " I'll just go by myself when it's kind of quicker without needing to explain it,” "you can get it done faster without having to explain it if you have to explain it,” and "that you can get it done faster.”

Six respondents shared that the ability to be independent was preferable to working with others on some things. "Sometimes I like to do it by myself,” "play on my own,” "on my own,” "I'm like more of an independent person so I don't… I don't really do it ,” "sometimes I like to be left alone,” and "I get to figure it out by myself.”

Three respondents indicated that lack of noise plays a factor in their willingness to work alone. "'I would go somewhere quiet if I could and try not to let anyone talk to me,” “quiet,” and "I do that by myself… when we have to do like a grid or something I am…

yeah I make something." Interestingly, all three of the respondents that indicated being hesitant to work alone because of their own low perception of their ability to work alone: "'Well learning alone… you're more apt to get something wrong," " if I learn by myself and I don't get it right and I just keep doing that for the whole time," and "I'm not really good on my own," were all perceived by their teachers as being engaged 90 percent to 100 percent of the time.

Julie shared, "I mean if you try your best, you'll probably get it right but if you make a mistake that's good because making mistakes will make you like… get better." Perhaps most revealing about how students think about themselves are the statements made about what good students do. Eleven students reported that a student's own behavior plays a role in being a successful or struggling student: "(good)they don't get mad," "(good) you get (behavior) awards at school meetings," "(good) if they could get nominated more than once for student of the month, they getting nominated every time," "(difficulty)she doesn't want to do all that stuff that we are trying to do," "(good) no spitting," "(good) whenever anyone's annoying him, he goes away," "(good) she always like...understands if you're...if you want to be alone," "(good) they only fool around if it's an appropriate time," "(good) quiet," "(good) they be nice to other people," and "(difficulty) he fools around a lot."

Effort and pay attention were among the most frequently reported attributes. Ten students implied that effort was an indicator of successful students: "your teacher congratulates you on working so hard'," "he did fine when he wanted to but this year he's choosing not to be a good student," "I try my best," "I mean if you try your best, you'll probably get it right but if you make a mistake that's good because making mistakes will

make you like… get better," "don't give up," "if you have to do play date with your really best friend but then something comes up like… like you have to have a conference you have to go to, it's like you have to take that risk. You just have to say, 'I cannot play with you today. We have to find another day to schedule this.'," "they always get their homework in," "Work my hardest to try the best I can," "that means don't give up," and "the person that was trying the hardest would practice more."

Ten students made statements to suggest that paying attention was an important criteria to being a good student: "they really focus a lot and also they always follow instructions," "good students pay attention," "he doesn't pay attention," "it's very frustrating because I'm trying to pay attention," "they usually pay attention," "they try to listen," "they would always pay attention," "they'll listen," "not paying attention," and "he listens."

Many students expressed statements that seemed to imply that their own learning was impacted by innate skills. Nine students pointed out that the ability to learn indicates a successful student. Six of the students indicated qualities that successful students have which improves their ability to learn: "They just want to learn things," "you get a five out of five on a quick check," " she gets math better that a lot of people normally do," "he's pretty good at spelling," "they are smart," and "ask the teacher for help." Eight students identified the lack of ability the causes students to be unsuccessful: "it's just that they can't catch up on things," "the person doesn't get much," "she can't really figure out like 18 divided by 9," "he may need some support," "the boy has problems with his speaking," "he can't control his mouth," "they've been absent a couple of times and they

missed quite a few things," and "he like gives Ms. Wolfe this like weird look like… 'I don't know what you're talking about. I don't get it'."

Seven of the students made statements to suggest that "good students" treated others in a positive manner: "if somebody has a problem, then they would help them," "they always support everyone," "treat their other peers with respect," "the best student in the class is my best friend," "they help the teacher and stuff," "they're a really good friend," and " they help people if they need help."

Jeff reflected, "I feel like I'm the only one who stops to think about what will happen when we get to college… will it be like super, super hard problems?... will I even be able to pass college?... will I even be able to get into college?...or will I even be able to get through middle school?" Nine students made statements that implied a connection between school and their futures: "I like the point that we are learning about lots of things and it's going to come in handy when the future comes," "School's good for my future," "right now my grades depend on my college… and my college depends on my job… and my job depends on my life," "I think the reading is important (to my future)," "School is important for my future because you have to learn a ton of stuff… like you don't know what you're going to grow up," "I think that (school) is important for my future because I get to learn stuff," "School is important to my future because I want to get a good job," "schools important…. for me and my future because I want to go… I want to do something like play NHL or get a good job," "you kind of have to use math (in the future)."

In summary, students made statements to suggest that they have strong feelings and unique ways of thinking about school. Students appear to understand the value of

school, and the characteristics needed to be successful. Students seem to understand the tasks, subjects, and learning modalities that help them experience success and difficulty in school. While recognizing all those, students are still able to express their own unique strategies that appear exciting and engaging to them.

Student perceptions of the degree to which they are engaged in school appear to be directly related to the degree to which they perceive the inclusion of "fun" in an activity. Student comments suggest that "fun" can be obtained through the design of an activity, or the personal interactions during an activity. The notion of "fun" as being the only indicator of student desire to engage may be a bold overstatement, however, if one considers the language and maturity of children in middle childhood, it may be that "fun" encapsulates an plethora of feelings and activities that are not easily distinguishable by a child. If that is true, it would suggest that to develop an understanding of student engagement it would be essential to uncover the rationale behind "fun."

THEME 2: PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS ARE IMPORTANT TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT.

Peer relationships were often brought up by students. Students reflected on the good relationships and the poor relationships. There was a consistent message that relationships were important and contributed (or deterred) from the school experience.

Amy stated, "Well I just like learning with a friend because I like socializing." When asked about things that they would miss most about school or look forward to most about school, children most frequently responded "friends." Eleven students shared statements that implied a desire to be with others, or be a part of something with others: "it was all sort of like teamwork," "they just include me," "they're right there whenever I

need them," "they accept who I am," "they're kind and...you want to help them back as much as you can," "I think it would be like bonding with others," "They will play with me if I don't have anyone to play with," "I like sports where I'm on a team," "They're always with me," "Quietness...with my friends," and "I like it because we get to socialize while were doing schoolwork."

Jean shared, "They're kind and… you want to help them back as much as you can." "They accept who I am." When asked why peer relationships are important in school, most students gave responses that identified a desire for positive treatment from others, and that acceptance was important: "she was very nice," "she throws it away for me ," "they help me in some way," "We've been through a lot together," "they're pretty fun to play with at recess," "They accept who I am and they accept what I do," "Because I want to meet them so…. I can like make new friends," "because I really care about them," "she helps me learn about stuff," "he's not mean at all," "because they've always been nice to me," and "I like it because my friends are funny."

Jon reflected, "Sometimes I fool around with them but sometimes they say, 'Okay, we had some fun. Now let's get back to work'." Students often indicated that working with others was important towards learning. All students made at least eight statements about working with others.

Six students gave response that indicated a preference towards talking with others to share their learning: "(reading) so I just say that what I just said stuff right there (to show my learning)," "(reading) when we do reading class when I read to the teacher…. she… since I don't know the word… if I don't know the word let's say… if I don't know how to say "extraordinary"… she would tell me how to say it," "(social studies) we

usually share our work...and work together," "(reading) someone reads one paragraph and the other person reads the other paragraph and then it keeps going." "(reading) In word work… we usually like say the word and we spell it… and we say like 'did I get a correct or not'.," and "(science) we're doing ecosystems so we're reading and discussing and… sharing our learning."

Seven students identified activities that included or implied inclusion of peers as the reason for their feelings about school: "really happy…because there's enrichment times and its sort of like the funniest day," " sometimes very, very depressed…I'm anxious because I can't stand another minute to wait to see my friends," "I feel like it's going to be a pretty good day...because people will like calm down in their pajamas… and today's also a big POG (free choice activity) day," "Confident...because I have a big… I have a party today and I think my classmates are going to like the gifts I got them for Valentine's Day," "I still feel happy about school...because I'm excited to see my friends," "I am feeling happy too...because I'm with all my friends and my best friends," and " I'm kind of hysterical...because all my friends that think I'm funny."

Half of the students indicated that others at school were a part of an average school day: "they always encourage me to keep practicing," "They're always with me.," "You get to see your friends every day.," "Just being with my teachers and friends," and "They're just always by my side." Two students may reference to their daily movement: "usually sitting down in our chairs," and "running, like playing a lot, running a lot."

Jeff shared, "They may torment me in all those ways and get my learning off base." Difficulties with others can impair engagement in school. While the majority of students recognized their personal responsibilities in paying attention in school, eight

students indicated that the difficulty of paying attention stemmed from the behavior of others: "if somebody is making weird noises," "they sort of just fool around and it doesn't really help," "like people talking out loud," "When people are fooling around, yes... but I try to ignore it," "sometimes people would just be distracting me," "If someone was like tapping or got in my space a lot then, yes but besides that, no," "it's hard for me to… like listen or pay attention when someone's talking or something," and " if there's a lot of noise I get used to it so I can focus but then once it goes silence I get so distracted on it but I can't focus."

Ten students expressed statements that implied the success of working with others was contingent on how the other treated them: "They say 'hi' to me which is really nice," "they're just a very good friend," "sometimes I fool around with them but sometimes they say, 'Okay, we had some fun. Now let's get back to work'," "they never say things… mean things to me," "they help when you need help," "if I'm like down he tries to get me to smile again," "They'll praise me," "we decide together what we want to do," "They make me laugh," and "They talk to me."

Becky noted, "They could not fool around because yesterday somebody was very rude to the teacher." When asked the types of things they would change at their school, the majority of students felt that a change of people's behavior is needed. The responses included: "'there's this student that's sort of weird to me… I can name her… she is to me… I'd change her personality," "being friendly," "treat people the way you want to be treated," "being nicer to each other," "'they could not fool around because yesterday somebody was very rude to the teacher," "They could pick up after themselves sometimes," "Try not to fool around…. because if one kid in your class fools around…

it's your whole class that gets in trouble… which I don't really think it's fair but I can't do anything," and "the teachers… like they should be a little strict but not be like strict, strict… because like it's not fair to the other kids."

Seven students made comments that suggest other students' behavior makes it hard to pay attention in school: "if somebody is making weird noises," ""The people around me. They might be talking…Stuff like that… making noise.," "like people talking out loud," "Distractions from other students," "someone tapping," "it's hard for me to… like listen or pay attention when someone's talking or something" and "when there's a lot of noise."

Four students made comments that suggest that other students' behavior can make school difficult: "Well something's happen that really bother me like bullies," "she called me 'little sassy miss perfect'.." "I saw someone on the other side write something… who wrote something that said 'I hate school' …so it was really sad for me," and "they don't really focus and stuff… because they're just worried about the bully."

Erica offered, "I most likely…like to do it with my friends…because they…they make it more fun." Most frequently "fun" was associated with activities that include peers. All of the students gave answers that either directly stated or implied that being with peers contributed to the definition of "fun."

In summary, students seem to want to regularly interact with their peers throughout the school day. More specifically, students desire positive interactions with their peers on a regular basis, and desire to change negative interactions into positive ones. Learning with peers appears to be important, and that dynamic seems to have the capacity to introduce "fun" into lessons where it is not otherwise present.

THEME 3: TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL.

Teacher relationships were often mentioned by students. Students recognized the difference between teachers that made the school experience a positive one and teachers that made school more difficult. Interestingly, they also recognized how teacher behavior impacted the school experience for others.

Stacy shared, “I would miss my awesome teachers.” When asked about things that they would miss most about school or look forward to most about school, the second most frequent response from all students was “teacher.”

Becky reflected, “It was nice that she had me stay in and she took her lunch time away to help me which I thought was really nice.” Ten students reflected on the way a teacher treated them or interacted with them as being a desired quality: "she would be nice and say 'Okay, just redo it again',” "She's nice,” "Nice…funny,” "caring,” "Like if you're stuck on something and you're like really stuck… the teacher comes up to you and encourages you that you can do it,” "I would say calm gentle and soft,” "because they're nice to everyone,” "Nice, kind… um… not rude,” "They're really nice,” and "being kind.”

Jeff noted, “She's like an overgrown bully to me…. a teacher bully and you know you can’t escape bullies who are teachers.” Eight students made comments about not-so-great teachers that implied that sometimes teachers say or do things that are unkind towards students: "she's just so she's mean to me… I don't get it,” "No you didn't get this right... you're going to get detention,” "people putting pressure on you. Like saying like 'you must do this and this and this and this'… it actually makes it harder,” " I always get

yelled at for not doing that and I don't think the teachers know that it is not my fault," "'if they shout out, 'You didn't do your homework! You go flip a card!'," "She always asks me to go to the end of the line," "the teacher blamed… put it out on everyone but only one person did it," and "If you don't pay attention, you'll lose some of your recess."

Similarly, four students' comments suggested that teachers have the capacity to embarrass students: "she was like 'If I see you not giving Valentine's to everyone, we're going to party and you're not'.," "telling to a class that you shouldn't be like this person because they didn't do this," "You took too much time," and "I get yelled at a lot sometimes too… from laughing."

Stacy noted, "She helped me by using my talents and embracing them to do my work." The majority of the students shared that teachers help students pay better attention and learn new things in school. Eight students made statements to suggest that teachers are able to do things to support students: "actually teachers if they catch you not looking just they tell you to turn around," "she showed me some books that I might like to read and I chose this one," "if you fooled around too much. Your desk gets moved away from everyone… like your own little island from people," "She can either like…. motivate us with a reward or something," "I forget who guided me but I think it was some teacher… someone guided me to that room," "my teachers kind of embraced my talent... to embrace to learn," "she would say 'Stay on topic, please'.," and "making flashcards."

Eight students made statements to suggest that teachers are able to help students: "They helped us on the mural," "'if we're like stuck on a problem then they should… then we should just raise our hand and then we can… and they can come over and help

us," "she helped me get along with my peers," "helping us learn new things," "She helped me figure out how to write," "if I'm working on something and I think I need help… she'll help me," "she really helps… helps me think about how she helped me with my fluency," and "if I'm struggling, they try to help me… and if that doesn't work they try harder to help me." Two students made statements to suggest that teachers are not helping all students: "very rarely we have people to help us" and "she doesn't help me really well."

Five students identified prompts a teacher can offer to help students pay attention: "it's like 'hey look this way'… that's all she does," "she just tells us to pay attention," "she says, 'Ready to rock' and if we hear her… we have to say, 'Ready to roll'," "she would say 'Stay on topic, please'," and "If you don't pay attention, you'll lose some of your recess."

Four students mentioned actions a teacher can take to help students pay attention: "switching desks that means you move away from others," "She usually puts the shades down sometimes if we keep looking out the windows," "she usually puts us in quiet places with… where people can't like talk," and "my teacher helps by teaching me how to be nice and learn."

Eight students identified ways that teachers run their classrooms, or teach, that impact the learning experience: "Well …they are not yelling all the time," "she helps students learn in a safe environment…learning environment," "have the choice for everyone if they wanted to," "(not-so-great teachers), they like…. get you like to do your homework," "They kind of say like 'So do you know what blah, blah, blah, blah' and your kinda like 'Oh I should pay more attention' and you kind of learn a lesson," "(not-

so-great teachers are) People that… ones that are really, really strict," "they really let you do whatever and you get to pick who you want to partner up with," and "giving students less homework." Such statements were more prevalent among third graders than fourth and fifth graders.

Students shared that teachers teach in ways that matter, and some made additional statements that teachers will try more than one approach with their students. Ten students shared that teachers teach in ways that matter: "'I'm an alien. I don't know what to do. Can you tell me what to do?'….she makes it funny," "well I like to write and she recently told us to write a story about weather," "the teacher could tell you where she got her source," "she taught us a new word and I always ask what does that mean and she like described how it meant," "she kind of shows us what it's going to show… and then we really get the hang of it," "help us learn what we want to learn...'Hey why don't you go do this class'…and they can teach you that," "She saw a video and then she taught me that day…no. the next day," "A teacher that gives you that gives you an extreme full understanding," "They can show it on a whiteboard or show it somehow," and "they showed me how to divide."

Six of the ten students made additional statements suggesting that teachers will try more than one approach with their students: "Sometimes they show videos to be more… you know… understood," "they show me ways I can do something I'm doing in a different way," "sometimes when I don't pay attention… she shows it in another way… and then when I do it kind of frustrates me because I get all the wrong," "Each teacher has a different way to teach kids," "if I didn't get it, they would go back and review it

with me until I actually got it," and "then my teacher will describe it… and it will make more sense."

Six students made statements that implied teachers can encourage students: "they encouraged us to study on Rufus Porter," "your teacher congratulates you on working so hard," "they always encourage me to keep practicing," "saying to the class 'You should be like this person because they did this and this'.," "she says, 'Oh, if you want to become an artist when you grow up you have to learn how to use money if you want to sell your paintings'," and "They encouraged me a lot."

Amy pointed out, "Well, if they didn't love learning, why would they be a teacher?" Similar to students' personal reflection on being a "good student," students reported that good teachers have innate qualities that make them good teachers: "Even teachers have been through school but they're the ones who really, really memorize in their head," " if you want to be a teacher you have to know how to learn," "she went for four years… four to five years of college to learn it," "they're much more educated," and "she looked online at night."

Seven students across all grade-levels identified additional skills that should be evident in teachers: "How smart they are," "a leader," "(not-so-great teacher) doesn't care about the kids," "and funny," "has a good education," "and...helpful," and "smart." Four students noted that the ability to make "fun" was an important quality for teachers to have: "(not-so-great teacher) not letting us have fun." "fun," " they're fun," and "fun."

In summary, students made statements to suggest that teachers can have a significant impact to student engagement. Those include the way teachers talk to students directly, the way they talk to other students, a teacher's willingness to have "fun" in the

classroom, the way a teacher manages student behavior, and a teacher's willingness to teach students in a modality that works for the student.

THEME 4: ASSIGNMENTS THAT INCLUDE A CREATIVE ELEMENT ARE MORE ENGAGING TO STUDENTS.

Brian shared, "I want classrooms I can control not lectures I have to sit through." As Brian's statement suggests, "student choice" may be important to student buy-in, but the way choices are given may be the key to engagement. A pattern among responses suggested that if students can choose how to demonstrate their learning, they prefer to do it in creative ways.

Six students expressed that learning was one thing they looked forward to or would miss about school: "learn," "learning," "I would miss learning stuff," "the subjects like PE, math, art," "I would definitely miss reading," and "I would miss art class."

Sean reflected, "I would miss being able to learn not only by myself or with a teacher but learn from my friends too." While learning was seen as a desired outcome of school that students look forward to, students were more specific about how that learning could take place. Nine student made statements implying a desire to build or create something as a way to show their learning: "we have this thing called Kinex…where you… where you can build things… and that's one of the activities that I like," "I would…build," "I like more hands-on experience with my work," "my Legos," "you could bring some of that stuff and we could create something with that," "I like creating stuff," "I like to build things," "I like to build so I would go with building it." and "I would like to make a craft project on it because I love arts and crafts."

Creating something was identified by three students as a strategy for remembering things: “Doing a craft or project on it… That really helps me,” “Like you could make up a rhyme to remember it,” and “making a poem….or a little jingle.”

Jean shared, “A diorama… and I took a big shoe box and I put everything I learned about that: plants… the animals… their adaptations. I think it was actually a really fun way to learn about it.” In expanding on their definition of “fun,” nine of the students included specific activities that involved some independent creative process: "We got to make a ...town and I made an ice cream shop.,” "it's very fun to do… because you get to like research and use a computer and stuff… and you get to build out of whatever you want,” "our lessons could be more… be more hands-on...active,” " it was pretty fun… I'd like to drawing out stuff about cavemen… I mean Vikings,” "it's a bit fun sometimes… cause you get to kinda sketch something,” "made like little houses and people and then we went outside and brought some twigs and leaves and dead-end stuff in,” "last year we had to make a diorama,” "you get to do like little experiments sometimes.,” and "an independent book project and we had a book that we read like and you have to do a project on it .”

Stacy shared, “Use your talents to figure out… to figure out the way that you want to learn.” Nine student gave responses that indicated a preference towards activities that involved a creative element: "(math) I’d like to do this for a build and I take a take a piece of paper… and I'd sketch…write the number of blocks around and then do the math in my head,” "(social studies) You could build like…a battle area or like the Revolutionary War models,” "(reading) I probably would draw out pictures of like what

it says in the text," "(science) We can do that by reading… reading the book that we can use… and then writing it down," "(math) you can draw pictures of that problem," "(reading) you could write a small story," "(math) you could use place-value blocks," "(social studies) we created our slideshows. And it really helped me figure out more about John Adams," and "(math) you could make out of it like a board game… like you could use flashcards with the board game."

Becky reflected, "We had a book that we read like and you have to do a project on it. But like… if you did like… a box and it was about that thing you can't do that the next time you do it so like you have to do something different. And so you can creative with it…it's like cool." Whether discussing projects, writing assignments, or creative play, the enthusiasm noted by all students was palpable. That was noticeably lacking in discussions about least-favorite subjects, which included statements that indicated not only a lack of opportunity to be creative, but rather an emphasis was placed on getting the correct answer: "Reading something new fast because that's like… that's really hard," "but if it gets like fractions or something… stuff about the outer space… it's hard to store. I'm not really sure how I can store it in my head. I'm just not so sure.," "My teacher asks a question and I'm like 'I forgot that.' That's what makes it hard too.," and "People putting pressure on you…like saying like 'You must do this and this and this and this'… it actually makes it harder… So because I'm afraid… I didn't get a good grade."

THEME 5: STUDENTS ENGAGEMENT CAN BE SUPPORTED BY COLLABORATING WITH OTHERS IN THE PROCESS OF COMPLETING ASSIGNMENTS BUT STUDENTS MAY PREFER TO COMPLETE ASSIGNMENTS ALONE.

While there was pattern of responses to support the desire of working with peers, there appeared to be an underlying message that individual achievement was important to students.

Jean noted, “It’s easy for me to like go and say… write down a whole three pages of books then… have to fill everyone in on it.” When asked to describe the best part about working alone, six respondents indicated working alone would not require them to have to explain or wait for peers to catch up: "you don't have someone that you have to constantly check up on and make sure they have everything written down in the same way and you can just do it by yourself,” “because no one has to say 'come on we got a hurry' all the time,” "you can go at your own speed and not like sitting there like most of the time just waiting for your friend to catch up with you,” " I'll just go by myself when it's kind of quicker without needing to explain it,” "you can get it done faster without having to explain it if you have to explain it,” and "that you can get it done faster.”

Erica reflected, “I like to do math and reading with my friends...I like to learn with my friends...because it’s a lot of fun.” Eleven students shared statements that implied that working with others impacted the learning opportunity: "sometimes they help me out on work,” "I like to do writing...because you can tell them what your story is about,” "if you're ever questioning… they may have the answer and if you both don't… you can try and work together,” "we should do people that are on the same pace as us so then we can do it at the same time without waiting or the other,” "if it's a short project

you don't have much catch up with them on," "I want someone to show me how to do it and then I would do it after," "if you have a different understanding than them, you can learn each way," "if I make a mistake, they can help me," "if you're with a serious person who wants to get their work done and just like you… then you should pick them and you know it's someone you will not for around with," "You don't have to do it all," and "you get to hear other kids ideas and maybe they kind a like help you learn it more." While such statements also seem to imply that working with others is preferable for a variety of reasons, no additional statements were made by the students supporting the desire for a joint product-completion with peers.

Jon shared, "I just feel like he's a perfect person." Seven student shared that good students treated others in a positive manner: "if somebody has a problem, then they would help them," "they always support everyone," "treat their other peers with respect," "the best student in the class is my best friend," "they help the teacher and stuff," "they're a really good friend," and " they help people if they need help." Those statements would seem to imply that how one is treated is important in school.

Jeff explained, "It's really nice of them but sometimes I want to do it by myself because if it's something easy and then they want to help me, I feel like a complete…I feel like a complete like… like I'm not smart." Students were able to identify a variety of ways where working with peers was advantageous to learning. Likewise, students expressed a preference for working with peers for discovery and feedback. However, for "getting done" with an assignment, peers were often seen as getting in the way or slowing them down.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What are the similarities and differences among individual student characteristics (e.g. gender, preferred subjects, etc.) and student-identified engagement?

A cross-case analysis was done of the interviews to look for patterns among students with similar characteristics. There was no pattern of responses that would indicate gender bias or grade bias toward working independently or towards working with others.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Several patterns were found between genders. Boys made more statements than girls about how working with others impacted a learning opportunity. Conversely, almost twice as many girls than boys made statements that suggested that others were an important part of the school day, and that student behaviors needed to change for the positive. Those patterns were consistent among all grade levels, suggesting that boys may put more emphasis on working with others, while girls put more emphasis on relationships with others. By comparison Jon shared, "They can help me along if I am stuck and I can help them along when they're stuck and we can just keep working together " and Amy commented, "Well I just like learning with a friend because I like socializing."

Preference for subject was different between the genders. Four girls and only one boy expressed an interest in using computers or electronic devices as part of their school day. All but one of the third- and fourth-grade girls chose art and math as their two favorite subjects.

Jeff noted, "Most of the girls pay attention. Boys sort of like…you know… a little sometimes." All of the students made statements to indicate that paying attention was

difficult in school, but girls were able to identify strategies to help themselves more readily than boys did so.

Brian explained, “I’m trying to pay attention and I’m always playing with my fingers and biting them and it’s just so hard to pay attention in school these days because… whenever… I don’t want to not pay attention and I always get yelled at for not doing that and I don’t think the teachers know that it is not my fault. I just get a lot of…I need to fidget a lot.” Similarly, girls more often recognized that self-control impacted their own abilities to pay attention, whereas boys more often identified peers, lesson content, or a teacher as being the cause for an inability to pay attention.

GRADE DIFFERENCES

When asked about their feelings about school, most of the third and fourth graders used the word "happy.” While the majority of comments made about school were positive, there was a declining trend in the number of positive comments per student about school as grade levels increased. Each third grader made three positive comments. In the fourth-grade group, one student made four positive comments, while his peers made only one or two positive comments. In the fifth-grade group, students made only one or two positive comments.

Similarly, there was an increasing, albeit small, trend in the number of negative comments per student made about school as the grade levels increased. In the third grade, only one student made one negative comment whereas the other students made none. In fourth grade, two negative comments were made by one student, and a second made one, while their peers made none. In fifth grade, at least one negative comment was made by three of the four students. However, neither of those patterns was present regarding

students' comments on learning. The pattern in both third and fourth grade was consistent with half of the students making three positive statements about learning and half making one positive statement, whereas fifth grade students made one or two positive statements. While more positive comments were given about learning in third and fourth grade than in fifth, the presence of negative comments ranged from zero to two comments per person with no apparent pattern.

Six students (three third-graders, two fourth-graders, and one fifth-grader) referred to how their amount of energy or sleep at certain time times of the day impacted their abilities to learn. The pattern implies that may be less of a concern as students get older.

Grade may play a role in student perception of school. Statements associated with feelings about school indicate an increase in the frequency of negative student-perceptions of school as they mature through the grade levels, but the perceptions of learning do not appear to vary greatly when identified separately from school.

Teacher-Identified Engagement

After interviewing students, the researcher held short conversations with each of their primary teachers. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of student engagement. Nine of the students were perceived as being engaged in school 85 percent to 100 percent of the time. Three students were seen as engaged less than 60 percent of the time. Teachers used visible cues such as eyes on teacher, participation, getting work done, raising hands, and apparent abilities to work with others. Students deemed as less engaged appeared to be lacking in those areas. For the students identified as mostly engaged, every teacher was able to identify some activity or intervention to help maintain

and increase engagement. For the students that were identified as engaged less than 60 percent of the time, teachers were not able to offer ideas to improve engagement, but rather identified it as a lack of desire or interest on the student's part.

While teacher perceptions were not quantified for this study, the patterns of answers among those three students did have some similarities.

All of the less-engaged students (LES) shared a preference for working with and being with others versus working or being alone. That helped to define "fun" at school. Doing work with others appeared to be problematic if the wrong individual was selected to be their partner: "It kind of does because sometimes a person would chitchat… or like they… would like fool around with me… but with some people like some of my friends like Rhonda, Emma, and Pat… they're good partners for me," "it's sometimes is more distracting but if you do have a friend that is really focused in their work… if you are as well, you can get a lot… some good work done" and, "if we have to do it without others…. I think it's okay but it it's like homework and I have to practice with others, I'm not so like fun about it because like… last time I did that someone cheated off my answers and they got the test right and I didn't."

Jean recognized that great teachers are "Cooperative…Be nice… Say you don't understand something… they'll take out of their time to help you." Brian noted that not-so-great teachers, "Blame the kids a lot… doesn't like getting up in the morning…cranky." They all expressed that teachers can support students, as well as say unkind things to students. The LES recognized that teachers have unique skills that make them good at what they do.

They all expressed difficulty in school with things like paying attention, their emotions, learning, and the school schedule. But unlike many of their non-LES peers, none of the LES placed blame on the behaviors of others in making school difficult.

All LES identified outside rationales that impacted how they felt about school each day: "it depends on the mood I'm in… what happened in the morning and stuff …so it depends on what happens at home that affects how I feel…," "because I'm having some oranges and I had some bacon eggs and a bagel this morning," and "Well my parents…I just that… we're going through a tough time right now. My mom, I just want to make her really happy right now. And doing really good in school and getting good grades. My mom and dad have been getting…we've been getting a little better."

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The investigation of student engagement is multi-faceted and complex, primarily because of lack of common definition. This research attempted to uncover student engagement through investigating its source: the student. In an effort to shed the "adult lens" used in previous research, this research reviewed students' own words to develop an understanding of student engagement. Emerging themes from this study suggest that student engagement is individualized, and depends largely on interpersonal relationships that encourage and empower students.

To propose that the current research confirms or refutes previous research is difficult because of context and measurement of the descriptors. The analysis presented below draws common themes and their context from previous research and offers, to the extent possible, the comparisons to the emerging themes in this study. Two major constructs of engagement were explored in this study: cognitive engagement and emotional engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

How do the characteristics of student-identified engagement relate to commonly used adult-identified characteristics present in the research literature?

UNDERSTANDING COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

Student cognitive engagement is commonly acknowledged to include how a student thinks about individual learning.

This study revealed that students think about their education in many ways. Not only do they consider how education will affect their futures, but how each lesson can stand on its own merit. They consider how their own styles of learning can improve their

learning outcomes. They think about how their environments can be changed to facilitate better learning outcomes.

In previous research to measure cognitive engagement, Lewis (et. al 2011) used the future aspirations and goals subset of the SEI (Appleton et. al. 2006) for cognitive engagement: a five question Likert-scale survey. Essentially defining cognitive engagement as the ability to set future goals and school's relevance to those goals, Lewis limited the scope of student thought around how they approached learning.

Similar to Lewis and Appleton's work, evidence of future aspirations and goals was seen in this research. All students in this study were able to either identify a future goal and/or a connection between their futures and doing well in school. However, two of the three students identified as mostly not-engaged by their teachers, made statements to suggest that there are parts of school that will not be useful for their futures: "I don't know why math and all the other things are important (for my future)," and "some things in school will not matter about your future." Those statements, though may be due to individual student immaturity, and not necessarily an indicator associated with engagement.

Unlike work by Van Ryzin (et. al., 2009), "hope" was not expressly investigated in this study. Students were not asked about goals setting per se, or their attainment of those goals. Setting goals was represented in discussion about school and their futures. Most students were able to verbalize a future career and/or education beyond high school. In addition, most of the students were able to make a connection between those future aspirations and doing well in school in the present.

To understand student learning and Van Ryzin's "ability to identify workable routes to goal attainment," students in the current study were asked to identify alternative strategies and modalities to improve their learning. All students were able to identify at least one strategy to improve memory. Most of the students identified a time of the day that best supports their learning. Most students were able to identify a different modality that would improve their learning. More importantly, most of the students were able to express a willingness to learn things in different ways, a preference for learning, and a desire to learn new things. That suggests that students are perceptive to their own abilities and can recognize ways to improve their learning.

Whereas the current study identified the self-reflection of paying attention and following rules consistent with measures termed as cognition, Lewis used the behavioral subscale of the School Engagement Scale (SES-B, Fredricks et al. 2005) and identified it as a measure of behavioral engagement. That four-item, Likert-scale, self-report student survey investigated paying attention and following rules.

Van Ryzin's measure (2009) of behavioral engagement included 10 Likert-scale questions that investigated how students feel about school and learning. As stated previously, students' feelings about school and learning were mostly positive, though more positive statements were made about school than about learning. Van Ryzin measured emotional engagement through 10 Likert-scale questions that investigated student perception of effort, participation and attention. In the current study, most students agreed that effort, participation and attention were important skills to being a good student. Though there was a range of answers, all students were able to reflect on their own abilities at those skills. While it may be possible that student agreement of

those traits was given simply as a "socially acceptable" or "expected" answer, it should be noted that not all students expressed proficiency with all the skills, which one would expect if the answers were given in an attempt to please the researcher.

While most interviewees made statements suggesting a relationship between feelings about learning and activities, either in or out of school, the activities were not viewed as rewards because they were not contingent on learning. It is important to note that the extrinsic motivators did support student feelings on both learning and school throughout the day. That is in contrast to earlier work (Appleton et. al, 2006), which used the connection between learning and rewards as evidence of extrinsic motivation. Appleton's survey asks students to respond to questions that contain "I'll learn, but only if..," making the assumption that extrinsic motivation is an either/or domain. Results from this research suggest that extrinsic motivators for learning exist on a continuum rather than as either/or situations.

Lewis (et. al 2011) proposed that life satisfaction is a predictor of behavioral engagement. In other words, the better a student feels about life, the more likely he or she is to consciously engage in school. As defined above, the results of this study would indicate that the answer is not that simple. When considering factors such as paying attention and following school rules, students reported that the difficulty with doing so was not due to their feelings about school, self, or others, but rather a function of desire, others' behavior, and teacher abilities to control other students' behaviors. Students who reported few or no negative feelings about school reported those difficulties, similar to students who reported negative feelings towards school.

Based on Lewis's (et.al 2011) instrument for life satisfaction, is it fair to say that this study investigated school satisfaction. Additionally, since students in middle childhood have limited life experience, it may be fair to use the terms "school satisfaction" and "life satisfaction" interchangeably as they have been defined and investigated here. Lewis's seven item, Likert-scale self-report (Huebner, 1991) sought information from students on the perception of their lives and desire for changes in their lives. The current study investigated perceptions of school, learning, and self. Additionally, the topic of "change" was approached with all students. All students in this study were able to express opinions in all four domains.

Like Hirschfield & Gasper (2009), students were given the opportunity to reflect upon their cognitive engagements, specifically, to report on their psychological investments in school, positive strategies to cope with poor school performance, and how well they can learn various subjects. In the current study, when given the opportunities to give positive strategies to cope with poor school performance, most of the students made statements suggesting that learning is difficult as a reason for their school performances. Their strategies included being allowed to give creative solutions to show their learning and, to a lesser extent, working with others to show their learning. Paying attention in school was a difficulty common to all of the students in the study as well. While students experienced that to a varying degree, commonly stated solutions included changing one's one behavior and changing the behavior of others.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Student emotional engagement is commonly acknowledged to include how a student feels about their learning.

Dotterer and Lowe (2011) found a significant positive relationship between classroom context and psychological engagement. More specifically, students in classrooms that were perceived by observers to have high-quality instruction, a positive social/emotional climate, and teacher-reported low teacher-child conflicts, were more likely to report positive feelings towards school.

Those constructs are worth exploring in terms of this study as there was some evidence to suggest that student feelings about school are connected to the things that happen in school. However, this researcher suggests that teacher perceptions of teacher-child conflict (Dotterer & Lowe) may not be accurate. In the current study, when students were asked for perceptions of teachers, three students who were perceived as mostly not engaged by their teachers, gave more positive perceptions of teachers than negative: a result consistent among all the students interviewed. However, when asked about their feelings about school, the same three students made more statements suggesting negative feelings, dissimilar from the other interviewees.

This study did not investigate for evidence of high-quality instruction (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011) in the classroom impacting student interest in school, but it is interesting to note that in the more than fifty comments describing how students feel about school, only one student made one reference to the quality of instruction: "she gives us these great assignments." Responses that indicated students' feelings about school related to learning included statements that were subject specific or assessment-related.

Ladd & Dinnella (2009) noted that children's behavioral participation in classrooms seemed to influence their emotions in school, and likewise, their emotions towards school seemed to influence their behaviors. The current research would support

that premise. It is interesting that math and computers were more often identified as preferences by girls rather than boys: most research suggests that is not the case. That may be a result of a culture where girls feel encouraged to engage in those areas.

Students reported by their teachers as less (behaviorally) engaged also reported more frequent negative feelings about school than their peers who were reported by teachers to be more engaged. In regards to future performance, all students interviewed in the current study were able to identify a future learning goal, and most of the students were able to make a connection between that goal and schooling. Similarly, most students made statements that implied their own behavior and effort significantly impacted their abilities to be good students. That suggests that students, like their teachers and parents, view their own behaviors in school as indicator of their abilities to be successful in school, and that those same students saw value in school. The pattern of responses would suggest that perception manifests the same among students perceived by teachers as less engaged and students perceived as more engaged.

Skinner et. al. (2008) found that a relationship exists between emotional and behavioral engagement. Emotional engagement in the fall of the school year significantly predicted improvements behavioral engagement in the spring. Similarly, behavioral engagement impacted emotional engagement during the same time frame. To clarify: students' perceptions of how hard they worked in school (behavioral) shared similar attributes both positive and/or negative about how they felt (emotional) about school, and the reciprocal relationship was true as well.

Unlike Skinner's work, this study captured student perceptions at one time of the year. However, the link between behavioral and emotional engagement as defined by

Skinner and others is worth exploring. All students in the current study made statements suggesting their own behavior made a difference in their abilities to be successful in school, and reasons for their behavior was often linked to how others treated them or how they felt about themselves.

Additionally, the current research would suggest that how students feel on a given school day, will impact how hard they try on that day. That was supported by statements from students indicating events at home, peer interactions and teacher interactions as being the primary reasons for a good or bad school day. Also students made statements to suggest those indicators affected how they performed in class, paid attention, and were able to grasp lessons. However, there was no pattern of answers to suggest that the way most students perceived their work ethic impacted their feelings about school. Still, the researcher cannot dismiss the argument, as one student made statements suggesting that that might not be the case: “if somebody says ‘get your work done’ and later you'll do more work and do more… then you have to do this… it just puts me on low spirits and I just work slower so...” And “I just can’t sit there and write… I just can't do that. I need something to motivate me… something that to look forward to after my work.”

The strongest predictor of emotional engagement noted by Skinner and others was autonomy. Autonomy was investigated by asking questions to uncover the degree to which students’ perceptions of their commitments to education were driven by intrinsic versus extrinsic motivators. To the extent that a student was seen as intrinsically motivated, that student was seen as more autonomous. Students reporting as autonomous were a strong predictor of a decrease in reporting boredom.

The current research investigated student perception of autonomy through questions directed at uncovering student perception of self-as-a-learner, and impact of others on learning. Student responses suggest that the ability or lack-of-ability to learn impacts the ability to be good student. All students defined "fun" as activities that included others. To that extent, students appeared to be largely driven by extrinsic factors. However, only two of those students, who were identified as less engaged by their teachers, mentioned boredom in their feelings about school. That might suggest that extrinsic motivators can support student engagement, and it is not limited to intrinsic motivation alone.

Relationships with Peers

Most of the students made statements to suggest that working with others impacted learning opportunities, specifically, that the success of an outcome was impacted by how others treated them during that interaction.

Hirschfield & Gasper (2009) investigated emotional engagement by surveying students on how much students would miss aspects of the school experience. The relationship of those indicators of engagement was reviewed in the current study. A review of students' feelings about what they would "miss about" and similarly "look forward to" about school revealed that relationships with friends and teachers were important to all students interviewed.

Students were questioned about their feelings about school. The majority of students' responses suggested that relationships with others played a role in how they felt about school.

Considering this study in the perspective of Hirschfield and Gasper's work, there would seem to be a common theme of interactions with others and the behavior of others, at least in the domains identified as "emotional" and "cognitive." Unlike Hirschfield and Gasper, the current study supports the notion that interpersonal relationships impact engagement in both these areas.

"Peer support for learning" was supported in this current study by statements very similar to the survey questions asked by Appleton (et. al. 2006). (Table 1)

TABLE 1

Appleton (et al 2006) survey questions	Interviewee statements (present study)
Other students at school care about me.	They help me in some way. Because I really care about them. Because they've always been nice to me. She always cheers my up with jokes. They're right there whenever I need them. They will play with me if I don't have anyone to play with.
Students at my school are there for me when I need them.	They've been with me this whole…all the way. We've been through a lot together. He's usually by my side
I enjoy talking to the students here.	Being able to talk to my friends. Well I just like learning with a friend because I like socializing.
Other students here like me the way I am.	They accept who I am and they accept what I do. He does not make fun of anybody. Makes me feel good about myself.
Students here respect what I have to say.	(none)
I have some friends at school.	They are my best friends. They just include me. I love my friends. I think it would be like bonding with others. So many friends in this school.

Lack of interviewee statements supporting "students here respect what I have to say" may not have been evident because it was implied in the other statements regarding how peers treated them. It may be of note that that "respect" as a separate topic of study is more appropriately characterized by terms such as "nice to me," "treats me kind" or

"accepts who I am" as such statements may be a reflection of more developmentally appropriate language.

A significant number of interviewee statements supporting the desire to "belong" among a peer group suggests that Appleton's survey did not fully capture the depth of peer support for learning. Perhaps more importantly, interviewee responses to successful interactions with peers were variable, depending on the type of interactions and interacting behaviors. Such variability is not represented in Appleton's survey and therefore, could give an incomplete understanding of the impact of peers.

In a similar vein, Van Ryzin (et. al. 2009) investigated belongingness, teacher personal and academic support, peer personal and academic support, behavioral engagement (identified as effort and attention), emotional engagement (identified as interest and enjoyment), and hope (identified as an individual's orientation towards goals and perceived ability to identify workable routes to goal attainment). Van Ryzin found measures of belongingness in school were significantly correlated with engagement and hope.

The importance of "belongingness" is supported in this study, in that most students identified peers as the reasons for how they felt about school. Similarly, most students reflected on caring and fair treatment as desired qualities for teachers. Most students noted that the way teachers ran their classrooms was important to feelings. All students made statements that implied simply a desire to be with others or be a part of something with others. Most students expressed statements that implied the success of working with others was contingent on how the others treated them.

Van Ryzin found measures of academic autonomy and belongingness in school were significantly correlated with engagement and hope. This current study would support those findings to the extent that students expressing belongingness also made statements of future aspirations and strategies to attain those aspirations. Likewise, students who made statements implying the presence of belongingness in school also made statements of effortful participation in school and positive feelings about school.

Teacher-Student Relationship

In past research (Hughes et. al, 2008), the teacher-student relationship was investigated by surveying a teacher on ability to emotionally and socially connect with a child and the perception of the child's ability to do the same. The results suggested that girls had better relationships with their teachers than did boys. Girls also had better conduct in school than boys. That, in turn, revealed higher achievement scores, leading the researchers to conclude that a change in a student's effortful engagement impacts the teacher-student relationship quality, which impacts student achievement.

The current study would suggest that students may not see a connection between being effortful and their relationship with their teacher. Students reported that teachers often prompt students to pay attention in respectful ways. All students who reported difficulty with paying attention also reported positive feelings about their teachers. Most students implied that effort and the ability to learn were indicators of successful students. Good students were seen as being able to work well with others, and follow school rules. Students were able to identify that their own willingness/abilities to do those things impacted their abilities to be good students, which would suggest that they have developed internal loci of control. However, no statements were made to connect their

feelings about teachers to their effortful- and conduct-behaviors in school, suggesting that students in middle childhood have an under-developed sense of internal loci of control, or that a connection between the two is not causally related.

There was not a pattern of responses that would indicate that girls perceived that relationship any differently than did boys. However, one student's response would indicate otherwise: Jeff suggested, "most of the girls pay attention. Boys sort of like…you know… a little sometimes."

Lewis proposed that teacher focus on cognitive engagement, as defined through the SEI survey (Appleton et. al. 2006), would be the most direct way to improve life satisfaction which, in turn, influences student engagement. As mentioned earlier, the future aspirations and goal subset ignores how students think about daily assignments, ways to learn, and how they approach new learning. While this researcher supports the notion that cognitive engagement seems critical to improving life satisfaction, his research would suggest that a focus on improving future aspirations and goals for students alone will not be sufficient to improve life satisfaction.

The effect of positive social/emotional climate on positive feelings towards schools is probably the most supported characteristic in this study. Dotterer and Lowe (2011) identified two domains, "classroom over-control" and "chaos," to suggest that classroom management impacts student perceptions. That was supported by the consistent comments from all interviewees regarding the need for teacher control to keep others students' behavior in check. The absence of teacher control was noted as making it difficult to pay attention, and ultimately, to try one's best in school.

"Teacher detachment" and "teacher sensitivity" domains (Dotterer and Lowe, 201) indicate that relationship with students impacts student perceptions. That was clearly supported through the majority of teacher-related comments that indicated a preference towards how students were treated by teachers as a rationale for their feelings about teachers.

The Allure of Creativity

"Interest" has been deemed as critical to improving student engagement. (Ainley, 2012) More specifically, developing a "hook" to grab a student's attention, followed by a "switch" to connect with the student and give meaning, has been key to engagement. However, interests vary widely among students.

"Creativity" is often characterized by the ability to express oneself. In that light, one could define creative work as an extension of one's emotions. Much research has supported that students are more engaged when their emotional needs are met (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006).

The connections among "interest," "creativity," and "engagement" may be the key to developing engaging lessons. As students are given the capacity to be creative in their abilities to demonstrate understanding, they are being given the capacity to share their emotions. That could, in turn, strengthen their belongingness to school, which impacts their willingness to engage (Van Ryzin et. al. 2009).

Student Collaboration on Assignments

A surprising theme emerging from this study was the notion that while students enjoy and thrive on peer interactions, final completion of an assignment should be left up

to an individual. Whether that is a function of the preference for personal versus group accolades for an assignment, or a function of lack of confidence in peer performance, is unclear. Statements were made in the interviews that would appear to support both of those theories. Clearly, students preferred to talk about assignments with peers, share information with peers, and investigate with peers. The current study would suggest that such interactions improve engagement. Similarly, previous research would support that preoccupation with other thoughts, such as conflict with peers (Yair, 2000; Boulton, Trueman, & Murray, 2008), have been found to impair engagement in school.

Past research (Jang,2008; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004)) suggested that students need to perceive autonomy while working on an academic task. The current research would suggest that student autonomy on assignments holds at least equal standing with the ability to collaborate with others, though future research could explore the relationship more fully.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Practitioners seeking to find the single "answer" to student engagement through this or similar studies would be disappointed. While this study would support that positive relationships and creative lesson planning are critical to support student engagement, the manifestation of those attributes may need to be completely different for different students. Future researchers on the topic of student engagement need to respect the complexity of individual preferences, and interpret the results as guidelines rather than constructs.

Change of Engagement within a School Year

This research attempted to uncover student engagement from students' point of view. The snapshot of student understanding at one point in their school careers gives a limited view of engagement, which is likely more accurately defined as a continuum of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings as opposed to set factors. Future research should consider how the perception of engagement changes over time for both students and teachers. As children develop into adults, maturation takes place that changes perception of their worlds and their places in them. Since engagement in school is a manifestation of that change, it is likely that it will fluctuate over time.

Transferability

Consideration should be given for variations among socioeconomic or regional sample groups. The current study used a sample group of students from the northeastern United States in a middle- to poverty-income area. It is reasonable to think that driving external motivators such as participating in skiing, hockey, and even spending time with parents may vary in other regions with other resources. Even the ability to offer certain classes like physical education or art, or the provision of library resources, varies greatly around the country. In the absence of such resources or the addition of others, student perception of engagement may vary.

Motivation

Motivation was not directly discussed in this study, but underlying reasons for preferences were sought. Often statements were made to suggest individual preferences, however, the quality of relationships with others was commonly given in conjunction with preference or as a standalone attribute. "the effects of peer support in school may be

multi-faceted, in which peer factors such as modeling and socialization contribute to engagement in learning"(Van Ryzin,et. al. 2009, p.9). Future research might focus on dissecting how those relationships form, and are maintained, as a student matures.

Family Support for Learning

Unlike Appleton (et. al. 2006), feedback on family support for learning was not directly sought in this study. While it was not a prevailing theme, some students made comments that seem to suggest that family support affected their school experience: "doing really good in school…my mom, I just want to make her really happy right now," "it depends on what happens at home that affects how I feel," "because it's a half-day and I get to see my parents a little early," and "I like to learn from my parents if I have no idea what it is."

Since parental influence on children often wanes as they mature, the impact of family support on learning during middle childhood may influence school engagement over time. Future longitudinal research could investigate the relationship between family support for learning and engagement. Regardless of the outcome, such research could assist schools foster family support.

Implication for Teacher Practice

Given that student engagement can be taught, the implications are that teacher practice can influence the ability to improve student engagement. This research supports that students desire positive interactions with their teachers. Additionally, student statements suggest that teachers can negatively impact the teacher-student relationship through disrespectful comments, lack of follow-through, sarcasm, and negative attitudes towards students.

The research would suggest that teachers could increase student engagement by listening and responding to student feelings, supporting creative thinking, and providing opportunities for peer collaboration.

Students indicated learning is more engaging when it is "fun." It is important to note that "fun" is often differentiated from "play" in the eyes of students. While students identified "play" as "fun," it was also classified as activities with the teacher that included nontraditional modalities for learning, such as delivery of a lesson in a funny voice, or allowing children to move in demonstration of a concept.

Future teacher training-programs could place an emphasis on teaching the skills necessary to improve teacher engagement. Training could include courses geared towards engaging in supportive talk with students, developing lessons that include opportunities for student self-directed creativity, understanding student motivation, understanding gender differences, understanding developmental differences, and developing the capacity to bring "fun" into the classroom.

DIRECTION FOR POLICY

If student engagement in school is the key to improving student achievement, then public policy must be directed to address it. This study suggests that students' feelings about school are driven by their connections with others in school, and those feelings impact a student's willingness/ability to engage in school. It would seem that school personnel and families would be in the best place to help provide a framework for personal relationships that develop as a child matures. Policymakers would do well to explore the topic further by designating funding to investigate it more fully. For decades, public schools have stated their objective to educate the whole child. Policy efforts to do

so have been limited to funding academic programs, medical programs, and food programs. While some districts have been able to form partnerships with mental health agencies, funding for those programs is far less stable than funding for other areasPolicy directed at funding professional development and activities for schools to strengthen the capacity to foster meaningful relationships with students and among students, would seem to go a long way to increasing student engagement.

Additional policy could be directed to fund training for schools on developing curriculum that offers students the ability to demonstrate knowledge through creative processes. As school budgets are being restricted to essential programs and services, curriculum supporting the arts are being reduced or eliminated. Legislation could be targeted to provide additional funding for the arts, or finding creative ways to incorporate the arts into existing core curriculum.

Though it would be difficult to address in policy, this study would suggest that more attention should be directed toward the type of personality important for a teacher receiving certification. When students in this study identified difficulties with teachers, the majority of comments seemed to imply that those teachers did not treat the students respectfully. Whether "treating other respectfully" is an innate trait or a learned skill, it seems to be essential to fostering positive relationships with students. The notion of teacher engagement is currently being explored (Pittaway, 2012) in an effort to understand that. Policy directed at uncovering and/or measuring this attribute in future teachers would seem to impact the quality of student educational experience.

SUMMARY

Previous research suggests that student engagement can be quantified by measurement or rating. This research suggests that engagement is more complex than a scale can capture. Student engagement should not be thought of as a discrete set of skills, but as a continuum of personal investment that can be influenced by external factors and personal perceptions. Previous research has identified behavioral engagement as a domain of engagement. The current research would suggest that behavioral engagement is likely a product of the interconnection between cognitive and emotional engagement, not a separate domain. Cognitive and emotional domains, however, appear to be interwoven: one impacts the other, both positively and negatively. In other words, the ability to think about education is built upon feelings towards education. As students experience success in their thinking about education, they are more likely to have positive feelings about their education, which, in turn inspires them to think more about their education.

The current research suggests that strategies to improve student engagement include classroom structure, lesson design, and interpersonal skills. Structure changes require involving students in discussions about their learning. Lesson-design changes include allowing the students the capacity to demonstrate their learning in creative ways, and providing opportunities for collaboration among peers. Interpersonal skills appear to be important to both teachers and students. Teachers should be able to ask developmentally appropriate questions, listen to, and understand student language. They should be aware of the differences in the emotional needs and cognitive process in both genders and all grade levels. Similarly, students need to understand their own emotional needs and cognitive processes, and develop the capacities to recognize the needs and

processes of others. The descriptor of "fun" could be applied to all of the above attributes if designed with students in mind.

The difficulty with changing student engagement lies in the difficulty of understanding individual student engagement. To invoke a change in student engagement, one must be clear as to how "change" is needed. The ability to measure a student's engagement cannot be easily quantified through a simple survey tool because despite researchers' best intentions, they describe the student engagement experience through an adult's lens. More appropriately, as this research has attempted to demonstrate, more valuable and usable information can be gleaned from the source: the students. Interviewers should use language that is developmentally appropriate and non-leading so that true student insight can be obtained. Schools and policymakers would do well to recognize that, and target needed resources to engage students in conversations about their learning. And it is not enough to merely have the conversations but rather, to listen and make real changes, so that students can become active participants in, and leaders of, their own educations.

REFERENCES

Ainley, Mary. (2012). Students' interest and engagement in classroom activities. In Christensen, S. L., Reschly, A.L., Wylie, C. (2012), Handbook of Research on Student Engagement (pp. 283-302). New York: Springer

Appleton, J. J, Christenson, S. L., Kim, D., Reschly, A.L. (2006). Measuring cognitive and psychological engagement: validation of the student engagement instrument. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44, 427-445

Baeten, M., Dochy, F., & Struyven, K. (2012). Using students' motivational and learning profiles in investigating their perceptions and achievement in case-based and lecture-based learning environments. *Educational Studies (03055698), 38*(5), 491-506. doi:10.1080/03055698.2011.643113

Balfanz, R., L. Herzog, and D. MacIver. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist* 42 (4): 223–35.

Blumenfeld, P., Moell, J., Bartko, T.W.,Secada, W.G., Fredricks, J.A., Friedel, J., Paris, A. School engagement of inner-city students during middle childhood. In Cooper, C.R., Garcia Col, C.T., Bartko, T.W., Davis, H., Chatman, C. (2005). Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity as resources. (pp. 145-170). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Bonesrønning, H. (2004). Do the teachers' grading practices affect student achievement?. *Education Economics*, *12*(2), 151-167.

Brown, Jane R., Dunn, Judy, (1996). Continuities in Emotion Understanding from Three to Six Years. Child Development, 67, 789-802

Carter, C. P., Reschly, A. L., Lovelace, M. D., Appleton, J. J., & Thompson, D. (2012). Measuring Student Engagement Among Elementary Students: Pilot of the Student Engagement Instrument--Elementary Version. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *27*(2), 61-73. doi:10.1037/a0029229

Ciani, K. D., Sheldon, K. M., Hilpert, J. C., & Easter, M. A. (2011). Antecedents and trajectories of achievement goals: A self-determination theory perspective. *British Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *81*(2), 223-243. doi:10.1348/000709910X517399

Common Core State Standard Initiative. (2009). National Governors Association and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/articles/8-national-governors-association-and-state-education-chiefs-launch-common-state-academic-standards

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2007). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Creswell, John W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* Thousand Oaks, California. Sage Publications Ltd.

Doron, J., Stephan, Y., Maiano, C., & Le Scanff, C. (2011). Motivational Predictors of Coping With Academic Examination. *Journal Of Social Psychology*, *151*(1), 87-104. doi:10.1080/00224540903366768

Dotterer, A. M., & Lowe, K. (2011). Classroom Context, School Engagement, and Academic Achievement in Early Adolescence. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, *40*(12), 1649-1660.

Finn, J.D. (1993). *School engagement and students at risk.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Finn, J.D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59,* 117-142.

Finn, J. D., & Cox, D. (1992). Participation and withdrawal among fourth-grade pupils. *American Educational Research Journal*, *29*(1), 141–162.

Finn, J.D., & Zimmer, K.S.. (2012). Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter? In Christensen, S. L., Reschly, A.L., Wylie, C. (2012), Handbook of Research on Student Engagement (pp. 283-302). New York: Springer

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*(1), 59–109.

Frisch, M.B., Clark, M. P., Rouse, S. V., Rudd, M. D., Paweleck, J. K., Greenstone, A., et al. (2005). Predictive and Treatment Validity of Life Satisfaction and the Quality of Life Inventory. *Assessment, 12*(1), 66-78.

Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of Relatedness as a Factor in Children's Academic Engagement and Performance. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *95*(1), 148.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. Chicago: Aldine.

Harris, L. (2008). A Phenomenographic Investigation of Teacher Conceptions of Student Engagement in Learning. *Australian Educational Researcher (Australian Association For Research In Education)*, *35*(1), 57-79.

Heilmann, J., DeBrock, L., & Chris Riley-Tillman, T. T. (2013). Stability of Measures From Children's Interviews: The Effects of Time, Sample Length, and Topic. *American Journal Of Speech-Language Pathology*, *22*(3), 463-475. doi:10.1044/1058-0360(2012/11-0035)

Hill, H.C. (2001). Policy Is Not Enough: Language and the Interpretation of State Standards. *American Educational Research Journal June 20, 2001 38: 289-318,*

Hirschfield, P. J., & Gasper, J. (2011). The Relationship between School Engagement and Delinquency in Late Childhood and Early Adolescence. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, *40*(1), 3-22.

Hughes, J. N., Luo, W., Kwok, O., & Loyd, L. K. (2008). Teacher-Student Support, Effortful Engagement, and Achievement: A 3-Year Longitudinal Study. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *100*(1), 1-14.

Huntley, M. (2009). Measuring Curriculum Implementation. *Journal For Research In Mathematics Education*, *40*(4), 355-362.

Ivey, Allen E., Ivey, Mary B., & Zalaquett, Carlos, P. (2010). Intentional interviewing & Counseling: Facilitating client development in a multicultural society. Brooks/Cole, Belmont, CA

Jang, H. (2008). Supporting Students' Motivation, Engagement, and Learning during an Uninteresting Activity. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *100*(4), 798-811.

Korkman, J., Santtila, P., Westeråker, M., & Sandnabba, N. (2008). Interviewing techniques and follow-up questions in child sexual abuse interviews. *European*

Journal Of Developmental Psychology, *5*(1), 108-128. doi:10.1080/17405620701210460

Kortesluoma, R., Hentinen, M., & Nikkonen, M. (2003). Conducting a qualitative child interview: methodological considerations. *Journal Of Advanced Nursing*, *42*(5), 434-441. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02643.x

Ladd, G. W., & Dinella, L. M. (2009). Continuity and Change in Early School Engagement: Predictive of Children's Achievement Trajectories from First to Eighth Grade?. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *101*(1), 190-206.

Lam, S., Wong, B.P.H., Yang, H., Liu, Y. (2012). Understanding student engagement with a contextual model. In Christensen, S. L., Reschly, A.L., Wylie, C. (2012), Handbook of Research on Student Engagement (pp. 283-302). New York: Springer

Landreth, Garry L. (2012). Play Therapy: The art of relationship. Third Edition. Routledge, New York, NY

Lewis, A. D., Huebner, E., Malone, P. S., & Valois, R. F. (2011). Life Satisfaction and Student Engagement in Adolescents. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, *40*(3), 249-262.

Lindberg, M. A., Chapman, M., Samsock, D., Thomas, S. W., & Lindberg, A. W. (2003). Comparisons of Three Different Investigative Interview Techniques With Young Children. *Journal Of Genetic Psychology*, *164*(1), 5.

Mah, V., & Ford-Jones, E. (2012). Spotlight on middle childhood: Rejuvenating the 'forgotten years'. *Paediatrics & Child Health (1205-7088)*, *17*(2), 81-83.

Marks, H. M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal*, *37*(1), 153-184. doi:10.2307/1163475

Mason, E. J. (2007). Measurement Issues in High Stakes Testing: Validity and Reliability. *Journal Of Applied School Psychology*, *23*(2), 27-46. doi:10.1300/J370v23n02_03

Merriam, S. B. (2009). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Neild, R., R. Balfanz, and L. Herzog. 2007. An early warning system. *Educational Leadership* 65 (2): 28–33.

Newmann, F. M., Wehlage, G. G., & Lamborn, S. (1992). The significance and .sources of student engagement. In F. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools* (pp. 11-39)- New York: Teachers College Press.

Noltemeyer, A., Bush, K., Patton, J., & Bergen, D. (2012). The relationship among deficiency needs and growth needs: An empirical investigation of Maslow's theory. *Children & Youth Services Review*, *34*(9), 1862-1867. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.05.021

Parkerhurst, J.T., and S. R. Asher. 1992. Peer rejection in middle school: Subgroup differences in behavior, loneliness, and interpersonal concerns, Developmental Psychology 28: 231-41.

Piaget, J (1972) Psychology of Intelligence. Littlefield, Adams, NJ.

Prince, D., & Howard, E. M. (2002). Children and Their Basic Needs. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *30*(1), 27-31.

Pinxten, M., De Fraine, B., Van Damme, J., & D'Haenens, E. (2010). Causal ordering of academic self- concept and achievement: Effects of type of achievement measure. *British Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *80*(4), 689-709. doi:10.1348/000709910X493071

Pittaway, S. M. (2012) Student and Staff Engagement: Developing an Engagement Framework in a Faculty of Education. Australian Journal of Teacher Education: Vol. 37: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Quigley, A. (1992). Looking back in anger: The influence of schooling on illiterate adults. *Journal of Education*, *174*(1), 104–121.

Ramey, H. L., Busseri, M. A., Khanna, N., & Rose-Krasnor, L. (2010). Youth Engagement and Suicide Risk: Testing a Mediated Model in a Canadian Community Sample. *Journal Of Youth & Adolescence*, *39*(3), 243-258. doi:10.1007/s10964-009-9476-y

Reiss, S., & Havercamp, S. M. (2005). Motivation in developmental context: A new method for studying self-actualization. *Journal Of Humanistic Psychology*, *45*(1), 41-53. doi:10.1177/0022167804269133

Reschly, Amy L., & Christenson, Sandra L. (2012). Jingle, Jangle, and Conceptual Haziness: Evolution and future directions of the engagement construct. In Christensen, S. L., Reschly, A.L., Wylie, C. (2012), Handbook of Research on Student Engagement (pp. 283-302). New York: Springer

Rich, J. (1968). Interviewing Children and Adolescents. Macmillan, New York.

Saywitz, K., Camparo, L. B., & Romanoff, A. (2010). Interviewing children in custody cases: Implications of research and policy for practice. *Behavioral Sciences & The Law*, *28*(4), 542-562. doi:10.1002/bsl.945

Schoeneberger, J. A. (2012). Longitudinal Attendance Patterns: Developing High School Dropouts. *Clearing House*, *85*(1), 7-14. doi:10.1080/00098655.2011.603766

Seidman, I. (2013). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences (4th ed). New York: Teachers College Press.

Shernoff, D., & Schmidt, J. (2008). Further Evidence of an Engagement–Achievement Paradox Among U.S. High School Students. *Journal Of Youth & Adolescence*, *37*(5), 564-580. doi:10.1007/s10964-007-9241-z

Shu-Shen, S. (2008). The Relation of Self-Determination and Achievement Goals to Taiwanese Eighth Graders' Behavioral and Emotional Engagement in Schoolwork. *Elementary School Journal*, *108*(4), 313-334.

Skinner, E, Furrer, C., Marchand, G., Kindermann, T. (2008). Engagement and Disaffection in the Classroom: Part of a larger motivational dynamic? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 765-781.

Skinner, E. A., & Belmont, M. J. (1993). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement.. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, *85*(4), 571.

Stipek, D., Children as unwitting agents in their developmental pathways. In Cooper, C.R., Garcia Col, C.T., Bartko, T.W., Davis, H., Chatman, C. (2005). Developmental pathways through middle childhood: Rethinking contexts and diversity as resources. (pp. 99-120). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Taormina, R.J., & Gao, J.J. (2013). Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs. *American Journal Of Psychology*, *126*(2), 155-177.

Teachman, G., & Gibson, B. E. (2013). Children and Youth With Disabilities: Innovative Methods for Single Qualitative Interviews. *Qualitative Health Research*, *23*(2), 264-274. doi:10.1177/1049732312468063

U.S. Department of Education (2009). Race to the Top Program Executive Summary. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf

Van Nuland, H. C., Dusseldorp, E., Martens, R. L., & Boekaerts, M. (2010). Exploring the motivation jungle: Predicting performance on a novel task by investigating constructs from different motivation perspectives in tandem. *International Journal Of Psychology*, *45*(4), 250-259. doi:10.1080/00207591003774493

Van Ryzin, M. J., Gravely, A. A., & Roseth, C. J. (2009). Autonomy, Belongingness, and Engagement in School as Contributors to Adolescent Psychological Well-Being. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, *38*(1), 1-12.

Van Ryzin, M. J. (2011). Protective Factors at School: Reciprocal Effects among Adolescents' Perceptions of the School Environment, Engagement in Learning, and Hope. *Journal Of Youth And Adolescence*, *40*(12), 1568-1580.

Yair G. (2000) Educational battlefields in America: The tug-of-war over students' engagement with instruction. *Sociology of Education*, 73, 247-269

Zigler, E., & Finn-Stevenson, M. (2007). From research to policy and practice: The school of the 21st century. The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77(2), 1

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewee		Interviewer	
Location		Date	

Interviewer instructions:

Recording

1. Use digital recorder to record the interview. Take notes throughout the interview.
2. Do a sample recording to make sure that microphone is working properly.
3. Record the interview. Stop the recording.
4. Ask the following questions in italics of each student.

Explanation of Study: *I am trying to understand what kids think about school. I would like to ask you some questions about your school experience. There is no right or wrong answers. I would just like to hear what you think. If at any time you do not want to answer a question, that's okay. This should take about 30 minutes.*

Introductory ice breaker: *Tell me about a movie you recently saw or a book you recently read? What happened? Tell me more? Can you give me some details?*

Throughout the interview, student will be neutrally praised to encourage and support rich answers. (e.g., "It sounds like you have thought a lot about that." "That's a very detailed answer." "It sounds like that is important to you.")

Cognitive engagement (What do you think about…? How do you think about…?)

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Different people like to learn in different ways. How do you like to learn? a) *Were those things you did by yourself or with others?* b) *Does it matter doing if you do x with yourself or others? (to uncover, Is the social piece or the project more important?)*	*What do you think about doing schoolwork with others?* *Does it matter who? Why?*	*Sometimes we do schoolwork with others and sometimes we do schoolwork alone. What is the best part about doing it alone? What is the best part about doing it with others?*
What time of day do you learn best? Why is that the best time?	*What time of the day is the best to work on the subject you like the least? Why is that the worst time?*	*What time of the day is the best time to work on the subject you like the most? Why is that the best time?*
Which would you prefer to do: • *Learn something on your own* • *Learn about it from a teacher* • *Learn about it from a friend* • *Learn some other way (What would that be?)* • *(Which is worse?) Why?* *(USE PICTURE PROMPT CARDS A)*	*Last time you said that you prefer to learn X: Tell me more about that.*	*When we talked before you said that you X is your least favorite way of learning. Tell me more about that.*
If a teacher gave you a choice of ways to show what you learned something, would you choose to: • *Make or build something* • *Write about what you learned* • *Talk about what you learned* • *Do something else (What?) would that*	*Give me an example of when you demonstrated your learning by doing X. Was that easy or hard for you? What made it so?*	*You said that you prefer to show your learning through X. Can you give me an example how you might do that in Reading? Math? Social Studies? Science?*

be?) *(USE PICTURE PROMPT CARDS B)*		
An assignment is something the teacher asks you to do or complete. Describe an assignment you found interesting. *a) How is that different from other assignments or activities?* *(uncover the timeframe of the activity, the materials used, teacher & peer involvement, new learnings)* *What activities do you choose when you are not in school?* *a) What about those activities do you like?*	*What was the last new thing you learned? Do you think you will remember it? Why?*	*What makes some things easier to remember?*
What are some things that make it harder for you to learn at school?	*Last time you said that X made it hard for you to learn at school. Is there anything that could be done to make that easier for you?*	
Tell me why school is or isn't important for your future. *If important: Tell me about what you will do with school in your future.* *If not important: Explain more about that.*	*Is there anything interesting you learned at school that you would like to know more about? Tell me about that.*	*Is there anything that you have always wanted to know about but they haven't taught you in school? What about that interests you?*
Do you ever have trouble paying attention in school? <u>If yes:</u> *Tell me what that is like.*	*What things help you pay attention in school?*	*Tell me what your teacher does to help you pay attention at school.*
Tell me what it means to "try your best in school."	*Tell me about things that make it hard to "try your best in school."*	

How much do you get to choose at school? Give me an example.	Can you tell me why choosing is or isn't important to you?	If I told you that you could change three things about your class, teacher or lessons, what would you choose to change? Why?
What are things that good students do? Which of those things do you do and which, if any, of those things do you have trouble with?	*Think of the best student in your class. Don't tell me that person's name but describe the person to me? What makes him/her such a good student?*	*Think of the student who has the most difficulty in your class. Don't tell me that person's name but describe the person to me? What makes it hard for him/her to be a good student?*
You do a lot of assignments at school, if you could do any of those assignments at home, what would you do?	*What if you could bring activities at home to school, what would you bring?*	*Which do you enjoy more, being home or being at school? Why?*

<u>Emotional engagement (How do you feel about?)</u>

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
What subject interests you most in school? What makes (subject) most interesting to you? Why?	*Last time you mentioned that you liked (subject). Is that still true? Tell me more about that.*	
Do you have someone at school that you look forward to seeing every day? Can you tell me about that? (USE PICTURE PROMPT CARDS C)	*Is there anyone at school that treats you nice? What do they do?*	*What could people do at school each day to make it a better place?*
What kinds of activities do you like to do best with your friends at school?	*What kind of school assignments do you like to do best with friends? Why?*	
Think of a teacher that has helped you learn a lot. What did the teacher do to help you learn? It could be from any grade current	*What can adults do to help children learn?*	*What makes a great teacher great? Why?*

or past. If no response: *Is there anyone in your life that has helped you learn a lot? What did that person do?*		
How do you feel about school today? *Can you give me an example of why you feel that?* *(USE PICTURE PROMPT CARDS D)*	*Last time we met you said that you felt X about school? How do you feel today?* If same: *Is that how you feel most days? Why does that happen?* If different: *Does it vary often? Why does that happen?*	How do you feel about school today? *Can you give me an example of why you feel that?*
What do you like most about school? If answers are recess, lunch or P.E., *What do like most about X?*	*Last time we met you said you liked X most about school. You said that liked it because of Y. Can you think of a way we could do Y in Reading? Math? Social Studies? Science?*	
Give me three words to describe school. (the "why" of perception)	*Give me three words to describe learning.*	*Give me three words to describe your favorite teacher.* *Give me three words to describe your least favorite teacher.*
If you were moving tomorrow, what are the things you would you miss about this school?	*If I told you, that you didn't have to go to school anymore, what, if anything, would you miss?*	*At the end of summer vacation, what is the one thing you look forward to the most about going back to school? Why?*
Describe what an average school day is like for you.	*Can you tell me about a day at school that did not go well for you? What happened?*	*Can you tell me about a day at school that went really well for you? What happened?*
Describe yourself as a student. (the "why" of perception)	*Give me three things to describe you?*	*Last time you said that you were X, can you give me some more detail about*

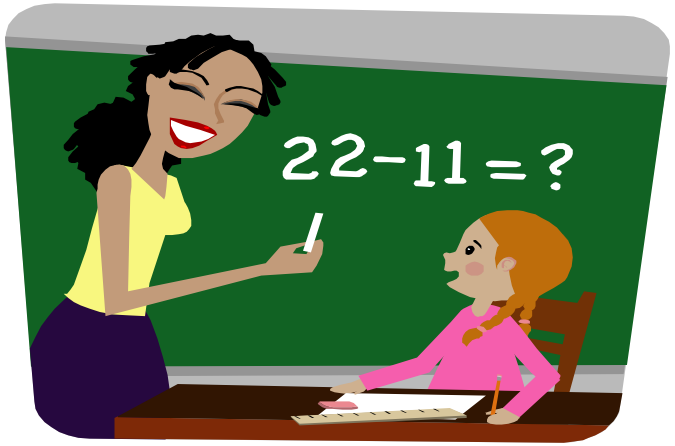
		that?
		What makes a not-so-great teacher?
		What makes things "fun" at school?
		Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your education?

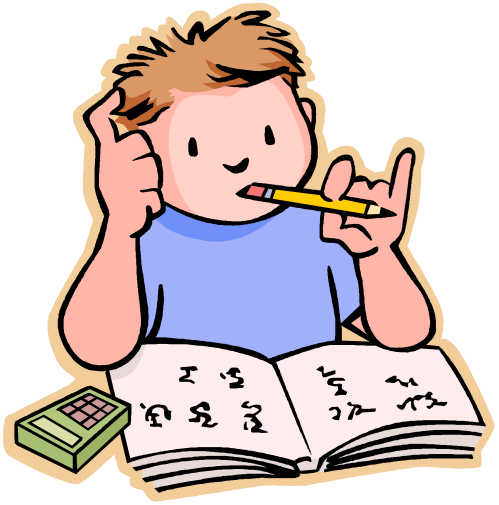
General follow up prompts

- Tell me more.
- Why do you think that?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- Go on.
- Can you give me some detail?

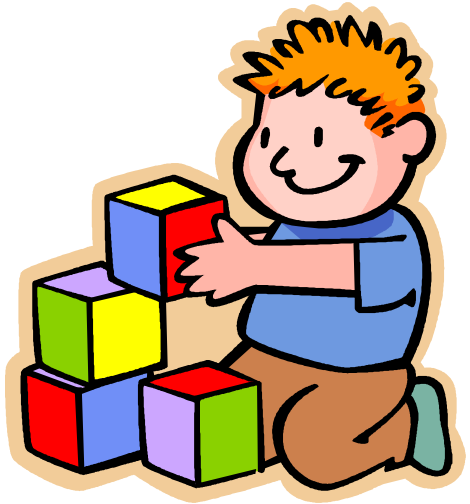
APPENDIX B: PICTURE PROMPT CARDS

Picture Prompt Cards A

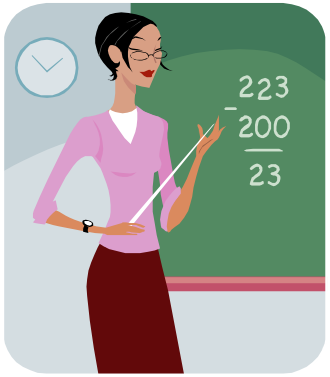


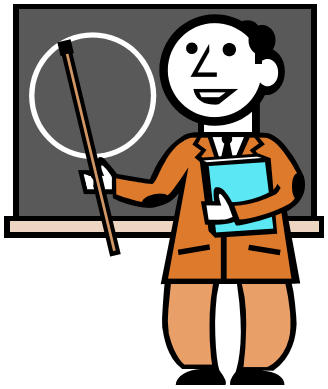


Picture Prompt Cards B



Picture Prompts C


223
200
23




STOP

Picture Prompt D

(Picture of drawn characters displaying emotions. Each emotion was labeled. Picture used was copywrited so it is not included here.)

APPENDIX C: DISTRICT REQUEST

District Request TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY
Muskie School of Public Policy, University of Southern Maine

Dear Superintendent,
My name is Mark Schrader. I am a doctoral student in the Muskie School of Public Policy at the University of Southern Maine studying Educational Leadership. I am writing you to seek assistance with my dissertation research, **"Understanding school engagement of elementary students."**

Purpose:. The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that encourage student engagement in the school setting. Through this study, it is this researchers hope that teachers will have a clearer understanding of student engagement and be able to structure classrooms, schedules and activities to facilitate more frequent student engagement.

Procedures: This researcher will interview twelve children (grades 3^{rd} – 5^{th}) to talk about their personal learning experiences, what he/she likes about school, activities that have been engaging, and teaching styles he/she has identified that work and don't work for students. Each child may be interviewed up to 3 times, not exceeding 30 minutes per session, over the duration of the school year. The interviews will be audio recorded. Selection of participants for this study will be based on school personnel's recommendation of a student who has the ability to converse about his/her educational experience. The research will take place between September 1, 2014 and June 1, 2015.

Risks: There are no known risks to your students participating in this study. Participation (or refusal to participate) in this study will neither help nor hurt your child's grades nor standing in the class. No reward or privilege will be granted for participation in this study. No information about academic performance, special needs, residence, or family will be collected for this study.

Benefits: It is possible that students will not benefit directly by participating in this study. However, this study should provide students with a valuable opportunity to think and talk about his/her learning experiences. Additionally, this researcher would gladly provide your district with a copy of the completed research.

Confidentiality: Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena. However, the confidentiality of project records will be maintained to the fullest extent possible. Responses from interview questions will be coded in such a way that student identity will be concealed. Students will never be identified with any particular response, comment or materials that he or she might share. This researcher will only need access to student's name, grade, and gender for data collection purposes. Names will be removed once data collection is complete.

Costs: There is no cost to your district beyond the time and effort required to participate in the activities described above. Interviews will be scheduled at the student's school at

times designated by school personnel to have minimal impact on the academic day. A space for interviewing will need to be provided by the school.

Questions: Please contact me at the phone extension or e-mail address above.
Please find the attached letter of agreement and this researcher's curriculum vitae. Feel free to contact me with any additional questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

Mark Schrader

Agreement between Researcher Mark Schrader and District

Your signature below will indicate that you have agreed to allow your district to participate with the research and that you have read and understand the information provided above:
Signature of Superintendent _____ Date _____
Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Researcher: Mark Schrader, Doctoral Student, University of Southern Maine
Elementary School Principal: C.A. Snow School, Fryeburg, ME and Brownfield-Denmark Elementary School, Denmark, ME
Office: 207-935-2536 207-452-2627. *Email:* mark.schrader@msad72/0rg

APPENDIX D: LETTER TO SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mark Schrader. I am a doctoral student in the Muskie School of Public Policy at the University of Southern Maine studying Educational Leadership. I am writing you to seek assistance with my dissertation research, **"Understanding school engagement of elementary students."**

The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that encourage student engagement in the school setting. Through this study, it is this researcher's hope that teachers will have a clearer understanding of student engagement and be able to structure classrooms, schedules and activities to facilitate more frequent student engagement.

I would like to ask for your assistance in selecting students that would be appropriate for this research. Since the purpose of this focus of this research is to understand student engagement through a child's eyes, I will be interviewing students directly. The information gathered will be used for educational purposes only and will not be accessible to school administration.

In selecting appropriate candidates to interview, please consider the following:

- The student should be willing to talk about their education.
- The student does not necessarily have to be well-behaved nor have high academic outcomes.
- The student should be capable of voicing an opinion and to the extent possible offer supporting arguments.
- These students do not necessarily have to present with strong engagement characteristics.

Once student are identified, I will be seeking parental permission for the interviews. Approved interviewed will be approximately 30 minutes in length. Each student will have to three interviews over a period of six weeks.

I would like you to identity _____ student(s) to participate in this study.

I want to thank you for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,

Mark Schrader

APPENDIX E: PARENT/CHILD INFORMED CONSENT

PARENT'S CONSENT FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

Muskie School of Public Policy, University of Southern Maine

Title of Study: **"Understanding school engagement of elementary students"**

Researcher: Mark Schrader, Doctoral Student, University of Southern Maine
Elementary School Principal: C.A. Snow School, Fryeburg, ME and Brownfield-Denmark Elementary School, Denmark, ME
Office: 207-935-2536 207-452-2627. *Email:* mark.schrader@msad72/0rg

Purpose: Your child is being invited to participate in the above research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that encourage student engagement in the school setting. Through this study, it is my hope that teachers will have a clearer understanding of student engagement and be able to structure classrooms, schedules and activities to facilitate more frequent student engagement. Your child was selected as a candidate for this study by school personnel based on his/her ability to converse about his/her educational experience.

Procedures: This researcher will meet with your child to talk about their personal learning experiences, what he/she likes about school, activities that have been engaging, and teaching styles he/she has identified that work and don't work for students. The interviews will be audio recorded. Your child may be interviewed up to 3 times, not exceeding 30 minutes per session over the duration of the school year.

Risks: There are no known risks to your child for participating in this study. Participation (or refusal to participate) in this study will neither help nor hurt your child's grades nor standing in the class.

Benefits: It is possible that your child will not benefit directly by participating in this study. However, this study should provide your child with a valuable opportunity to think and talk about his/her learning experiences.

Confidentiality: Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena. However, the confidentiality of project records will be maintained to the fullest extent possible. Responses by your child to interview questions will be coded in such a way that her or his identity will be concealed. Your child will never be identified with any particular response, comment or materials that he or she might share. This researcher will only have access to your child's name, grade, and gender for data collection purposes. Names will be removed once data collection is complete.

Costs: There is no cost to your child beyond the time and effort required to participate in the activities described above. Interviews will be scheduled at times designated by school personnel to have minimal impact on the academic day.

Right to refuse or withdraw: Your child may refuse to participate in this study. If you allow your child to participate, your child has the right to not answer any questions I might ask. Even if you agree, you and your child may change your mind and quit at any point.

Questions: Please contact me at the phone extension or e-mail address above.

Your child's rights: The rights below are the rights of every person who is asked to be in a research study.
As a research subject, your child has the following rights:
1) To be told what area, subject, or issue is being studied.
2) To be told what will happen to them and what the procedures are.
3) To be told about the potential risks or discomforts, if any, of the research.
4) To be told if they can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefit might
be.
5) To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study, both before agreeing to be involved
and during the course of the study.
6) To refuse to participate in the study or to stop participating after the study starts.
7) To be free of pressure when considering whether they wish to be in the study.

CONSENT: Your signature below will indicate that you have agreed to allow your child to volunteer as a research participant and that you have read and understand the information provided above:
Signature of Legal Guardian _____ Date _____
Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____
Mark Schrader, Graduate Student, University of Southern Maine

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Mark Schrader was born in Portland, Maine, and graduated from Exeter Area High School. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of New Hampshire in hotel administration. After two years in that field, he began a career in education, and received a master of education in special education from the University of Virginia. After teaching for a number of years, he received an advanced degree in school administration from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Mark has been in education for over twenty years. . He has taught subject matter to students in elementary school, middle school, high school and university. He has taught in self-contained, resource, and general education settings. He has lectured at both the local and state level on behavioral strategies, response-to-intervention, and high-performing, low income schools. His professional passion is “raising the bar” for students, teachers, and administrators.

Mark is the principal at a western Maine K-5 elementary school where the focus is on learning-centered instruction to improve student engagement. He is a candidate for the doctor of philosophy degree in public policy from the University of Southern Maine, and will receive the degree in December 2015.