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Middle School Students' Perceptions on Academic Motivation and Student Engagement

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Middle School Students' Perceptions on Academic Motivation and Student Engagement

Cassie Mauro

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of suburban middle school students' on academic motivation and student engagement. Ten students, grades 6-8, were randomly selected by the researcher from school counselors' caseloads and the primary data collection techniques included two types of interviews; individual interviews and focus group interviews. Findings indicate students' motivation and engagement in middle school is strongly influenced by the social relationships in their lives. The interpersonal factors identified by students were peer influence, teacher support and teacher characteristics, and parental behaviors. Each of these factors consisted of academic and social-emotional support which hindered and/or encouraged motivation and engagement. Students identified socializing with their friends as a means to want to be in school and to engage in learning. Also, students are more engaged and motivated if they believe their teachers care about their academic success and value their job. Lastly, parental involvement in academics appeared to be more crucial for younger students than older students in order to encourage motivation and engagement in school.

Middle School Students' Perceptions on Student Engagement and Academic Motivation

Middle School Students' Perceptions on Student Engagement and Academic Motivation

Early adolescence marks a time for change for students academically and socially. Students are challenged academically in the sense that there is greater emphasis on developing specific intellectual and cognitive capabilities in school, while at the same time they are attempting to develop social skills and meaningful relationships. It is often easy to overlook the social and interpersonal challenges faced by students in the classroom when there is a large focus on grades in education, especially since teachers' competencies are often assessed on their students' academic performance. When schools do not consider psychosocial needs of students, there is a decrease in academic motivation and interest, lower levels of student engagement and poorer academic performance (i.e. grades) for middle school students (Wang & Eccles, 2013). In fact, students who report high levels of engagement in school are 75% more likely to have higher grades and higher attendance rates. Disengaged students tend to have lower grades and are more likely to drop out of school (Klem & Connell, 2004). Therefore, this research has focused on understanding the connections between certain interpersonal influences and academic motivation and engagement.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze students' perceptions of academic motivation and engagement. Specifically outlined in this qualitative study are the aspects of the middle school social environment and students' interpersonal relationships that negatively and positively impact motivation and engagement. The research questions for this review are as follows: what are the middle school students' perceived challenges in the classroom

environment and how do these challenges impact their academic motivation and student engagement. Additionally, a discussion is included to further interpret the results as well as provide suggestions for change to better support students based on their identified needs.

Review of Literature

Classroom Social-Emotional Climate

Research has identified the role of the classroom social environment on students' academic engagement and motivational outcomes. Classroom social environment, also referred to in research as classroom emotional climate, consists of teacher and student support. Teacher and student support includes students' perceptions on feeling respected and cared about in the classroom (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). This support can also be considered emotional and personal because students experience specific feelings stemming from their connections with other students and their teachers (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). More importantly, studies have demonstrated that when teachers and students cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom environment, students are more engaged in the learning process. When students feel valued by others and become more engaged in their work, ultimately their motivation is enhanced as well. The following research outlined in this review demonstrates ways in which the classroom social-emotional climate impact student engagement and motivation.

Engagement in the classroom can consist of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Emotional and behavioral engagement consists of demonstrating behaviors which create feelings of respect and support. Cognitive engagement represents a more academic based engagement where students interact with one another in an effort to understand and comprehend material. One type is known as self-regulatory strategies and this type of engagement consists of

planning and monitoring when students determine goals and test themselves to ensure comprehension of material. Task-related interactions are another form of cognitive engagement and consists of peer conversations about subject matter in order to evaluate, discuss viewpoints, and provide feedback to one another (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) determined that when students feel emotionally supported by teachers and peers, they were more likely to demonstrate cognitive engagement. Wang and Eccles (2013) determined that school environment directly impacts three types of engagement in different ways and some aspects of the environment are more effective than others on all types of engagement. For instance, they determined that students are more emotionally and behaviorally engaged when they believe that teachers and peers care about them in their environment.

Student motivational outcomes play a role in the relationship between social-emotional climate and student engagement as well. Specifically, Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) determined that students' motivational beliefs, such as mastery goals and self-efficacy, mediated the relationship between social context and engagement. Essentially, the researchers demonstrated that a supportive social environment in the classroom encourages students to focus on understanding material and creates feelings of self-efficacy which supports student engagement. Wang and Eccles (2013) demonstrated that an emotionally and socially supportive school structure enhances students' perceptions on academic abilities and increases intrinsic motivation (i.e. interest in school) while also promoting student engagement.

Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White and Salovey (2012) also researched aspects of classroom emotional climate, student engagement, and academic achievement. The researchers suggest that high-quality student-teacher relationships coupled with emotionally supportive classroom environments, will promote engagement and learning. In order to test their hypothesis, they

collected data from 1,399 fifth and sixth grade students via classroom observations, student reports, and report cards. Their results indicated direct and indirect links between CEC and academic performance and student engagement mediated the relationship between both measures.

Specifically, a higher level of CEC in the classroom was related to higher grades, and a higher level of CEC was related to higher levels of student engagement. According to the researchers, these results imply when teachers demonstrate sensitivity and respond to students' emotional and social needs, they are more likely to be engaged in their learning, feel connected to the teacher, and obtain higher grades. In contrast, students in emotionally unsupportive classroom environments feel disconnected from their teacher, disengaged in their learning, and their performance suffers (Reyes et al., 2012).

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging for students stems from emotionally supported classroom environments and it is a concept that has been more closely looked at in the research. Research has specifically identified ways in which feelings of connectedness has impacted academic outcomes for students. Goodenow and Grady (1993) define belonging as the extent to which students feel supported, respected, and valued by others in the classroom and the school community. Similarly, Nichols (2008) defines belonging as the extent to which students believe they belong in a school setting and specifies that a sense of belonging can positively influence students academically. Research has indicated that when students feel connected to their school community, they value education more, strive for success in the classroom, and adopt healthier motivational practices towards academic success (Nichols, 2008). Additional research has also revealed a connection between student belonging beliefs and academic motivation.

Sense of belonging can essentially be derived from interpersonal relationships within the classroom (i.e. peer relationships and student-teacher relationships). Particularly, students' view of self in their relationships within the social environment can create a sense of relatedness to others. View of the self can include students' perceptions on how others think and feel about them (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Nichols, 2008). Furrer and Skinner (2003) investigated 3rd to 6th grade students' reports on sense of relatedness and how these feelings impact academic engagement and performance. In their study, Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that students' feelings of belonging in the classroom lead to increased emotional and behavioral engagement in school according to both student and teacher reports. At the beginning of the school year, children that reported increased feelings of belonging started off more engaged and motivated than students reporting low levels of relatedness and their engagement continued to increase throughout the year. Additionally, students with low levels of relatedness at the beginning of the year demonstrated a decrease in motivation throughout the year. In particular, when students felt supported and appreciated by their teachers, they were more likely to feel happy and comfortable in school, and these feelings generated greater motivation in school. Nichols (2008) determined that when students feel connected to others in school they are more likely to attend and this is also due to interpersonal aspects. Students believed they belonged in school when peers and teachers supported and treated them fairly. In contrast, students reporting low levels of relatedness felt bored, frustrated, and unimportant and were more disengaged in school. Overall, when students believed they were "liked", they were more likely to participate, they reported less negative emotions about school, and they discovered opportunities for learning and success (Nichols, 2008).

Bishop and Pflaum (2005) add to this literature on belongingness beliefs in their study on student perceptions on belonging in the classroom. They believed students possess deep knowledge in regards to what motivates them in the classroom. Through the use of participant-produced drawings and personal interviews, the researchers investigated the perceptions of twenty rural middle school students on academic engagement. Similarly to the research previously mentioned, students believed they belonged when they felt a sense of community in the classroom where students share a common purpose. Additionally, Bishop and Pflaum discovered that opportunities to lead classroom activities created feelings of connectedness for students. These perceptions lead to increased engagement which included time on task and listening to teachers. Their findings also indicated times when students did not believe they belonged which lead to disengagement. Disengagement was defined as time off-task and engaging in disruptive behaviors. Two social dimensions of belonging which deterred engagement were social isolation and negative peer judgment (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005).

Goodenow and Grady (1993) specifically discovered a significant relationship between students' sense of belonging and certain motivational measures such as overall school motivation, expectancy of success, and valuing school work. One main finding exposed in this study was students with a high sense of belonging in school were more academically motivated verses those students with low levels of belonging. Particularly, the results demonstrated positive relationships between feelings of belonging and general motivation, school work value, expectancy for success, and effort. The researchers further imply that these findings suggest that students find school more enjoyable and worthwhile when others value and like them. Furthermore, when others provide resources such as encouragement and help with academics, students are motivated and academically successful.

Social Relationships

Peers

Early adolescence marks a time of change. As students, adolescents embark on transition from elementary school to middle school and are forced to become familiar with new surroundings and new faces (i.e. teachers and peers). Relationships with parents and peers begin to evolve and change. Relationships with peers tend to be of utmost importance to middle school students as they begin to establish a social identity within their new surroundings. It is essential for adolescents to belong to a peer group and maintain a social life. Because of this, it is difficult to ignore the effects of friendships on academic achievement during middle school (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011). In their study, the researchers mention that the impact of students' friendships on the middle school experience does not get nearly enough attention. Therefore, they took a closer look at negative and positive friends' characteristics and how these specific attributes contribute to academic achievement in 6th-8th grade. Additional researchers have also found similar findings and their results are included as well.

Friends' problem behavior and school engagement influence adolescents' level of engagement in school. Friends' problem behavior could include substance use, delinquency, and aggression. Friends' school engagement is anything considered to be school appropriate behaviors such as completing assignments, classroom participation and leadership, following school rules, obeying teachers and extracurricular involvement. Veronneau and Dishion (2011) believed that friends' academic achievement and school engagement would encourage academic performance whereas friends' problem behavior would negatively influence academics and engagement. They also believed that friends' school engagement can positively influence friends' school performance even if friends' grades are lacking. Their findings revealed that

friends' school engagement acted as a significant predictor of positive change in academic achievement for participants and friends' problem behavior predicted a negative change in achievement. Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) also found that friends engaging in problem behaviors discouraged school engagement in participants and avoiding these behaviors promoted emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement.

Peer influence can also take place within the peer group through various socialization strategies. Socialization occurs when peers adapt similar attributes to one another over time. Selection and homophily are aspects of socialization that determine the make-up of a peer group. Ryan (2001) defines homophily as a group of peers with similar interests and qualities. Selection is when friends choose friends whose characteristics match theirs. Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) witnessed these aspects of socialization in their study when peers demonstrated negative values and beliefs about school which influenced other friends to develop similar beliefs and ideas. The researchers indicated that these values can be reinforced indirectly through the use of observation, gossip, and teasing.

These aspects of socialization have demonstrated an influence on academic motivation and engagement. According to Ryan (2001), the effects of socialization indicated a decrease in student motivation in 7th grade. Specifically, when peers associated with peers with a low intrinsic motivation for school in the fall, their own enjoyment for school declined when compared with students that spent time with others enjoying school during the year. Also, when low achieving students spent time with other low achieving students, their performance declined over the year. High achievers socializing with other high achievers demonstrated higher levels of motivation and better academic performance during the course of the year.

Anderman and Anderman (1999) also researched middle school students' social perceptions in the classroom and how these perceptions contribute to establishing specific motivational outcomes. Specifically, students focused on social status and developing social relationships with peers in the classroom demonstrated ability goal orientations. Ability goal orientations consist of students' focus on their ability as a means to outperform others, particularly within their peer group, and less focus on comprehending material. This type of motivational orientation is also known as "ego oriented." Students that demonstrate "ego-oriented" behaviors can suffer academically because there is a greater emphasis on how one is perceived by others within their peer group. For instance, there may be reluctance by students to obtain extra help from teachers or actively engage in learning if the peer group does not view these practices as part of the "norm."

Parents

In addition to the influence of peers, parents and guardians play a key role in students' academic motivation and engagement. The influence can be seen through specific parenting practices (i.e. authoritative parenting) and parental academic involvement (i.e. parental participation in school activities) in their student's academics. Research has looked at both types of influences.

Parenting styles consists of ways in which parents interact and engage with their children through communication styles and disciplinary practices. Some patterns of parenting behaviors include external control (i.e. providing rewards), lack of guidance (i.e. showing little interest in child's work), autonomy support (i.e. allowing children to develop own ideas), and authoritative parenting (i.e. setting high expectations, monitoring behaviors) (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera 2005; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). Bronstein, Ginsburg, and Herrera (2005) completed a

longitudinal study with early adolescent students during their last year in elementary school, 5th grade, and two years after their transition to middle school in 7th grade. The purpose of their study was to identify connections between specific parenting practices and children's academic motivation orientation during the transition. Specifically, they researched parental behaviors, academic achievement, students' self-perceptions, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivational orientation.

They predicted that parenting consisting of external control behaviors and lack of guidance would predict lower grades and low intrinsic motivation, compared to autonomy-supporting behaviors which have been associated with higher grades and higher intrinsic motivation. Their results demonstrated long-term effects of parental practices on students' motivational patterns through middle school. Most of these effects were indirect and were observed through students' self-perceptions on academic competence. Essentially, when students perform well academically, they tend to think more positively about their academic abilities, and therefore display intrinsic motivation orientations. Students with parents that exhibited external control parenting styles in 5th grade were more extrinsically motivated by 7th grade. External control behaviors could interfere with a child's interest in school, which could result in lower grades and feelings of incompetence, resulting in an extrinsic motivational orientation. Parental lack of guidance (i.e. less structure, family rules) also led to extrinsic motivational patterns, lower grades, and a more negative view of school. Whereas parental autonomy support behaviors influenced intrinsic motivation. This type of parenting allows children to express their ideas and encourages independent thinking which could carry over into academic settings and support the transition to young adolescence (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005).

Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) specifically looked at authoritative parenting style and ways in which this style encouraged school engagement. This study differs from others discussed in this review as the researchers focused on this type of parenting and ways in which it affected school adjustment and students' association with problem behaving friends. By doing so, the researchers were able to determine that school engagement was directly and indirectly affected. They determined that school engagement was positively affected when parents encouraged and supported school adjustment and negatively impacted when parenting patterns discouraged association with problem behaving friends. Thus, parenting characteristics play a role in student engagement as seen through students' choice of friends and ability to adjust to school.

Parental involvement with academics can include participation in school functions and activities, parent-school communication, and parents' academic aspirations for students. Similarly to parenting behaviors, parental academic involvement can encourage as well as deter academic motivation, engagement, and performance for middle school students. Specifically, the type of communication between school personnel and parents has an impact on student outcomes, mainly academic motivation, engagement and students' self-efficacy (Fan & Williams, 2009; Lam & Ducreux, 2013). Fan and Williams (2009) obtained an integrative view on eight categories of parental involvement on students' self-efficacy, engagement, and intrinsic motivation in math and English.

One important finding of their study was the effects of the specific type of parent-school communication on motivational outcomes and feelings of self-efficacy. Specifically, parents speaking to school personnel about problems negatively impacted all five types of motivational outcomes (i.e. self-efficacy in math and English, engagement, and intrinsic motivation in math

and English). In contrast, communication about students' academic achievements, suggestions for academic assistance at home, and future planning positively influenced all five motivational outcomes. The researchers proposed that parents treat children differently after speaking to school personnel based on whether the subject matter was positive or negative, which can influence academic self-efficacy and motivation. Likewise, Lam and Ducreux (2013) revealed that the more communication about school there was between parents and students, the better the students performed in school. These results could imply that parental communication demonstrates to students that parents value their educational experience and therefore, students perform better in school. They also determined that communication between students and parents creates a supportive environment which could increase self-esteem in middle school students. According to the researchers, enhanced self-esteem could trigger motivation in school for students.

Teacher Support Characteristics

The role of teachers on students' academic motivation and engagement can be seen through perceived level of teacher support in the classroom. This support differs from the social-emotional support discussed earlier in this review as this support is mainly derived from teacher characteristics and teaching practices (Klem & Connell, 2004; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Siegle, Rubenstein, and Mitchell (2014) studied the influence of teachers on student motivation from the perspective of recent high school graduates.

In their study, Siegle et al. (2014) conducted focus group discussions with 28 honors undergraduate freshman to determine the role of teachers on their high school experience. Specifically, the researchers focused on obtaining their perceptions on the influence of teachers

to their academic interest and motivation. In doing so, students identified specific teacher characteristics that lead to increased motivation in school and a desire to perform well.

Students explained when teachers appeared respectful, relatable, and accessible they were more interested and motivated in school. Additionally, if teachers seemed knowledgeable and competent in the subject and if they were able to apply content to the outside world, students were more academically motivated. Not only was it important for teachers to appear knowledgeable, but students found passionate teachers very inspiring and motivating. Additionally, when teachers appeared hard working (i.e. committed and focused) students were more likely to put forth effort in learning (Siegle et al., 2014). In order to foster motivation, it was also essential for students to develop task value to subject material.

Students also identified task value as motivators for learning. When teachers provided challenging and meaningful material; they were more likely to engage in their school work. Students appreciated teachers that made content relevant to them, which essentially motivated them to want to learn more about subject matter. Additionally, how teachers delivered the material was important to students. Students shared differing opinions about what type of instructional method worked best, but all students emphasized the importance of variety in teacher's delivery methods (i.e. lecture, interactive, discussion) as this positively impacted motivation (Siegle et al., 2014). Klem and Connell (2004) further investigated teacher support by focusing more on developing a link between support and student engagement, verses teacher support and motivation.

Klem and Connell (2004) collected data from students and their teachers in elementary and middle schools in an urban school district. They identified that teacher support consisted of classroom structure and autonomy support. Classroom structure consisted of clear, focused

expectations and autonomy support included independent decision making opportunities.

Additionally, for the purposes of their study, engagement was defined as ongoing engagement (i.e. student behaviors, emotions, and thought processes in school) and reaction to challenge (i.e. student coping strategies for handling challenges). For the purposes of this review, only results for the middle school sample will be discussed.

Overall, the results demonstrated that when middle school students believe teachers provide organized classroom structure, a caring environment, and clear expectations, students are more likely to report engagement in school. Also, this study demonstrated a link between high levels of engagement and higher attendance rates and test scores. There was also an indirect link between student experience of support and performance through student engagement, which essentially demonstrates the mediating role of being engaged in school.

Additionally, middle school students were 68% more likely to feel disengaged in school when experiencing low levels of teacher support when compared to elementary students. In contrast, middle school students were nearly three times more likely to report engagement when experiencing teacher support in the classroom than those with typical levels of support. Also, middle school students experiencing high levels of teacher support were 75% more likely to achieve high levels of academic performance and commitment than average students (Klem & Connell, 2004). These findings are similar to the findings in the Siegle et al (2014) study as they demonstrate the importance of teacher support on aspects of student motivation and engagement.

Academic motivation and student engagement are vital pieces to academic performance. There is evidence indicating that there is decline in motivation and engagement in academics during adolescence. Educators become concerned with these student outcomes when they are lacking, as unmotivated and disengaged students can serve as a reflection of their competence as

teachers. In fact, teachers are often assessed and evaluated based on students' academic performance on various tests. Students also are receiving similar academic pressures while at the same time embarking on new environmental and social experiences. This literature review not only identifies specific environmental and social contexts in middle school settings, but also displays the challenges they present to motivation and student engagement. Classroom social-emotional environment, peers, parents, and teachers all engage with middle school students directly and indirectly and these social experiences impact their academic outcomes. These challenges are important to consider when grasping the bigger picture of what occurs for students demonstrating or lacking motivation and engagement.

This current study aims to explore and analyze middle school students' perceptions on academic motivation and student engagement and how various social dimensions impact these student outcomes. While some of the existing literature captures the perspectives of the learners themselves, a majority of the literature focuses on external observation or teacher/parent reports. Although teacher and parent reports create valuable data about engagement and motivation, there is still room for misinterpretation in understanding the specific social challenges students face in their environment. This study focuses on the perspective of students in order to develop a more in depth understanding on this subject matter while also providing recommendations based on their feedback to those involved in their academic experience.

Method

Participant Selection

The research for this study took place in a predominately White suburban middle school in the northeastern United States consisting of 6th-8th grade students. According to the 2012-2013 School Data Report Card, 85% of the students are White, 6% are Latino, and 4% are Black

or African American. Four percent of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged and 7% of the student population is eligible for free lunch and 4% are eligible for reduced-price lunch (NYSESED, 2014). Students were selected randomly from school counselor caseloads and only students receiving special education services were excluded from this study. Three to five students from each grade level, varying in academic abilities, socio-economic status, and race, were recruited and the principal researcher individually discussed details of the study with each student. From there, students were asked to obtain parental consent as well as their own consent to participate and return the consent forms to the principal researcher. There was a total of ten students in this study.

Procedures

Data Collection

To determine middle school students' perceptions of academic motivation and engagement, data was collected through qualitative measures. These procedures included individual interviews with students followed by grade level focus group interviews. The individual interviews contained personal open-ended questions for the researcher to develop a better understanding about the students' thoughts and feelings about peers, academics, personal goals and aspirations. Personal interview questions were as follows:

1. Tell me about your family
2. What are your friends like?
3. What do you do for fun?
4. Tell me what school like for you
5. How would your friends describe you
6. What is the hardest part about school for you

7. Tell me about someone you see as a role model
8. What makes someone a “good” friend to you
9. What do you see yourself doing in 10 years
10. What motivates you

Focus groups were conducted following individual interviews, again in a private space in the school. Rules for the focus group were provided and the researcher then asked specific questions targeting student perspectives on academic motivation and engagement. Each student was encouraged to participate and the interviews were audio recorded. Focus group interview questions were as follows:

1. Are there times when you feel more motivated to do school work than at other times?
 - a. If so, what is the difference?
2. Do you find you work harder for some teachers than others?
 - a. If so, what about the teachers' styles either motivate you or don't motivate you?
3. What type of classroom environment helps keep you engaged in your work?
4. Do you feel supported by your teacher in class?
 - a. If so, how does this help your motivation and engagement?
5. Do you feel supported by your peers in class?
 - a. If so, how does this help your motivation and engagement?
 - b. If not, what would help to make you feel supported by others in class?
6. Is there anything your parents/guardians do to help you to be motivated and engaged in school?
 - a. If yes, how could parents help?
 - b. What do you find that is unhelpful to you?

7. Are there times when your peers negatively impact your engagement in school?
8. How do you set goals for yourself?
9. If you had a wand and could change the classroom environment entirely, what would it look like?
10. Is there anything else you want teachers and guardians to know about your academic involvement?

All interviews were conducted in a private space with the researcher and the student.

Interviews were audio recorded and any identifying information was not disclosed throughout the process in order to ensure students' confidentiality. Names were not stated during interviews nor documented during the transcription process. Audio recordings were recorded on the researcher's personal device and the device was left in a locked office when not in use.

Recordings were then uploaded onto the researcher's password protected personal laptop and transcription documents were saved onto the researcher's password protected USB thumb drive.

All audio recordings were permanently deleted following the transcription process. After completion of the study, typed documents were permanently deleted and any printed materials were shredded and destroyed.

Interviews were the main method of data collection as this approach provides participants with an opportunity to share and disclose their personal insight and perspectives, while supporting one another through the process. Generally, data collected on this subject derives from observations made by educators, school administration, and guardians which can overlook the subjective point of view of the students.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded on the principal researcher's audio-recording device. Tapes were transcribed verbatim and coded by the researcher to determine any emergent themes. The researcher coded individual interviews and combined the themes across the grade levels. For the grade level focus group interview data, themes were identified for each grade level and then combined with all grade levels. Only significant differences or findings between grade levels were analyzed and coded.

Results

Data was collected and analyzed from the individual and focus group interviews. The researcher identified any and all emergent themes amongst all the grade levels and combined the data. These results are explained in the following results section.

Peer Influence in School

Students described their friends as supportive, fun, positive, honest, reliable, and caring. Students also reported that friends generally share the same interests as them such as sports, afterschool activities, and hobbies. Only two eighth graders mentioned that they tend to associate with friends that have similar academic interests as them. They mentioned that most of the peers they socialize with do equally well in school or they are average performing students. No other students made reference to this.

Students reported they enjoy school and their classes because they get to see their friends throughout the day. This provides them with a reason to be in school and since nearly all participants are involved with afterschool activities and very busy outside of school (i.e. playing sports and participating in clubs), being in school is the only time they have to socialize with friends. One student in particular mentioned that even if she finds a class challenging she is

more likely to engage and be motivated in her work if she knows she has friends in class with her. The 8th grade student stated, "Classes are easier if I know I have someone in class that I know because that helps. I am taking living environment so science is harder because I am in an advanced one but I have a friend in that class so that helps me stay engaged." A 7th grade student also reported that seeing her friends helps her stay motivated in school. In response to being asked what motivates her in school, she stated, "My friends because I get to see them throughout the day and year. It is like if I go to one class and keep my grades up, I don't have to stay after school and miss hanging out with my friends and meeting up somewhere." An 8th grade student explained that seeing friends during the day in school motivates her and one of the reasons she likes school is because of the fact she gets to see people.

Students reported having friends in class can also serve as distraction limiting their engagement and motivation. One 8th grade student mentioned her friends "poke fun" of her when she participates too much by calling her a "Try Hard." She explained, "Because I try really hard in school they call me 'Try Hard' and it just makes me mad. So like if I am in class with them, I don't wanna act like a 'Try Hard' so I won't raise my hand." Students also reported incidences in class where classmates comment that questions she asks the teacher are "stupid" and because of this, she will stop asking questions even though she needs clarification from teachers. Another student also shared similar experiences in class when her friends make fun of her in class which distracts her from the rest of the school day. She explained, "They just say something that like makes me feel bad or like gets me confused, or they make fun of me and I think about it for the rest of the day so it keeps my mind off school stuff." Another student shared a similar experience of trying to fit in with the popular kids in class by acting in a similar manner in order to get a positive reaction out of classmates. Instead, he explained, because he

doesn't appear as popular, students "make fun" of him in class which negatively impacts his engagement. Another student stated he often faces temptations to fool around in class with friends which deters his engagement during the school day, especially since he often obtains a consequence such as in-school suspension or lunch detention.

Teacher Influence

Teachers Are Interested in Your Learning and Want You to Succeed

Every student participant reported feeling supported by their teachers which positively impacts their motivation and engagement. In response to the question if students feel supported by teachers one student replied, "Yes, they all want us to do well, I mean, that is why they are here. And it is their job to make sure we understand it and that we do our best." The student further explained that even if she answers a question incorrectly, the teacher will take the time to explain the answer and help her understand which will impact the likelihood that she will be engaged in class. Students communicated that when teachers provide opportunities to ask questions and review material they are more likely to feel engaged. One student stated, "One teacher she will review and ask questions and make sure we understand. I like when teachers are more involved and helpful." Students also explained the importance of teachers attempting to get to know who they are on a more personal level. Students explained if they feel supported they have positive feelings about school and will engage more with their teachers.

If You Get Something Wrong, Don't Sweat It

Students reported that receiving encouragement and empathy from teachers motivates them in school. Specifically, one student recalled his experience with a teacher who helps build his self-confidence in his abilities. The student explained that when teachers give challenging

material and accept mistakes, they feel confident and supported by their teachers. His explanation of one particular experience is as follows:

“He doesn’t yell. He doesn’t raise his voice. He will say, ‘I know this is hard, I think it is hard. If you get something wrong, don’t sweat it. Just don’t worry,’ so he gives us positive confidence. If he says try something this way, I am gonna do it and then I get my grade back and it is correct.”

Additionally, students discussed the importance of demonstrating effort in their classes and teachers’ positive responses to their efforts. Students reflected on personal experiences when teachers provide more empathy and sympathy when they make mistakes (i.e. forgetting an assignment) if teachers see that they try hard in class most of the time. Students mentioned that when teachers appear sympathetic in these situations, they feel more comfortable seeking help and engaging in class because they feel understood by teachers. Therefore, they will continue to try hard in class. One student explained, “A teacher will understand if you are a kid that actually tries to like do good in school and just make you feel good because that teacher will support you no matter what happens they are not gonna ever hate you, because I mean, you are trying.” Students compared teachers with strict/rigid expectations to those that appear more sympathetic and understanding by reporting that they are more likely to be engaged in situations where the teacher takes the time to acknowledge their efforts and understand their mistakes verses ones that do not provide that support.

Also, some 6th graders reported higher levels of engagement and motivation when they felt the need to impress their teacher in some way. The need to impress the teacher also depended on whether or not the student felt a strong connection with the teacher. In response to a teacher’s role in engagement and motivation, one seventh grader explained, “It depends on if I

like the teacher or not. If it is a teacher I don't like I am like, 'Okay, I might do well in this class or I am totally gonna flunk it.' But if it is a teacher I like, I am like I wanna impress her so I will do all this work."

Teaching Strategies

All students agreed that when teachers make lessons fun and demonstrate enthusiasm and energy, they are more likely to be engaged in the class. Some students mentioned that even if it is a subject they are uninterested in, if the teacher is interesting and jokes around some, they will pay attention more in class. One student spoke about her preference for teaching styles which include humor. She provided an example of one teacher in particular. She stated, "Like he will do funny things during class, like not the whole class, he will just do it randomly and we all start dying laughing and it motivates us to get through the rest of the class." Other students agreed that even if a subject they are learning can be boring, when teachers use humor, it helps to stay engaged in class.

They also reported that if a topic is boring and everyone knows it is boring, if teachers act interested in their learning and that they are into their job, they are more likely to engage in the subject. One student explained, "If teachers act excited, everyone will want to learn!" Students further explained that they are able to determine if teachers are interested in their job by how interactive they are with students and if they put forth effort which demonstrates they want to be there. Students also distinguished that being interactive means teaching "with" students and not teaching "at" students, as this will often disengage them from what they are learning.

The sixth grade students had a strong preference for when teachers take time at the beginning of a lesson to "loosen up." They mentioned they are more engaged in class when

teachers will ask questions unrelated to the subject matter to get to know them and relate to them before getting to work. One student explained,

“My unmotivational trait is when teachers get right to it. Like they come in, like all students get in, after the five minutes is done, they are like okay sit down and here is our first lesson, like they just get right into it. Like loosen up. Like if you say something it doesn't have to do with school, like having us talk about our weekend and sometimes it is funny, like you laugh a little and you loosen up, and the teacher is like okay, we had a little fun, now let's get down to it.”

Students further explained that when teachers provide lessons including hands-on learning opportunities, they are more engaged in class. Eighth graders mentioned how they enjoy opportunities to “build things,” dissect animals in science class, and create projects. One student mentioned how her engagement in class often hindered when teachers use worksheets to demonstrate knowledge in class instead of doing hands- on lessons like a game. She stated,

“Worksheets are just bad. I mean, you have to do work and then there is no reward for doing it really. Sometimes they don't even grade them. They just see if you did them or not and they are just really boring. Like do a game or something. Keep the class engaged and wanting to learn more.”

Her classmates agreed that when teachers use worksheets for students to demonstrate knowledge, they are less engaged in class.

Parental Influence

Students reported various parenting behaviors which either enhanced academic motivation or decreased motivation. The majority of the students in this student explained that when parents encourage hard work and utilize positive reinforcement, they become more

involved with their academics. In fact, eight out of ten students reported that parental influence was positively contributed to motivation and engagement when parents would encourage effort and hard work verses academic achievement. There were differences in regards to the type of parental influence and the impact on motivation and engagement amongst the grade levels as explained below.

Furthermore, sixth and seventh graders reported feeling academically motivated when their parents/guardians assisted them with their homework, provided them with fairly strict expectations with academic performance, and encouragement. On the other hand, 8th graders appeared to be more motivated with less academically involved parents. Less involved parents implied that parents would provide occasional encouragers and reminders about academic expectations, thus enhancing academic motivation within the students as they make their way to 9th grade. These students believed that when parents focused on students establishing their own academic performance expectations, they wanted to engage more in school and were motivated to excel. One student agreed that students need to rely on themselves for motivation by saying, "Like parents can only help you for so far there has to be a point where you gotta go what you gotta do." Eighth graders further explained when parents attempted to provide strict expectations and become overly involved in their school work, students considered this "nagging" and would be less likely to engage in their work.

Role Models

When students were asked who their role models were, more than half of the students responded that a parent or guardian served as a role model to them in some fashion. When further questioned about what makes their mom, dad, or grandparent their role model, most often students would reply with personal attributes they admire about that person. Students did not

select role models based on achievements or accomplishments, but their role models instead motivated them to act a certain way. For instance, one student explained he values his grandfather because he admires his ability to always be nice to others and never seem mad. While sharing his perspective on his grandfather he stated, "He is like the nicest guy. I have like never even seen him mad, he is just a good guy. Like he is so easy to talk to and we just like talk for hours about anything which is great." Similar perspectives were found when students discussed their parents being their role models. Students reported they admire their parents for being hardworking, overcoming challenges with ease, supportive and easy to confide in, trustworthy, compassionate, caring, and reliable. One student spoke about her mother's admirable qualities by stating, "She is a really nice kind, sweet person. And, when things go wrong she can push through them instead of just breaking down most the time and she motivates me to be the same way."

Academic Performance

Students reported working hard in school and achieving good grades motivates them because they feel good about themselves and obtain a sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, getting good grades will help later in their education and will allow them to join extracurricular activities. One student stated, "It is kind of silly but I feel like if I don't get good grades it is gonna go on my college resume and then I am not going to get into a good college. But if I get good grades it is gonna go into that. And I know if I don't get good grades in high school, I cannot play modified or JV sports and I am really into sports." One student explained the importance of grades by stating, "I just like hate bad grades or like negative stuff, so like if my grade is not good then I really want to get it up and this motivates me. I want to be the best in whatever I do, so I guess I kinda self-motivate in a way." For some, getting good grades creates

a sense of accomplishment and positive feelings about oneself. One student stated, "I just want to make myself proud because I feel like if I get a good grade, I feel like I studied well and did a good job."

Goal Setting

Overall, students had some difficulty explaining their personal goal setting strategies, and this was more apparent for the younger adolescents. When asked to link goal setting to motivation, younger students needed clarification on what this meant and then still were unable to answer the question clearly. Two 6th grade students responded with they just do what they have to do at that time. If goal setting was practiced by the students, the strategies implemented involved setting goals around academic achievement and ways to obtain good grades. One student explained, "This year I wanna keep above an 85 average, like last year. Um, I think so far I am achieving all my goals. I like all my teachers and I am getting all my homework done." One student explained her overall goal is to do well in school by obtaining a 75 average and even though she believes that is a "pretty bad grade," she would be okay with it because it is better than her average last year. Eighth graders were able to explain how they set goals and why they set goals as they expressed these goals in middle school would help them in the future with their academic and career aspirations.

Discussion and Implications

Middle school signifies a time when young adolescents begin to find their way in the academic arena but also in a personal/social arena. It is no surprise that due to this phase of life marked by physical and social/emotional development, students rely on others for support and guidance. The results from this study indicated that middle school students' motivation and engagement is impacted by relationships in their lives. The relationships which students

perceived influencers on motivation and engagement were peer-peer, teacher-student, and parent-child. Furthermore, positive relationships consisting of academic/emotional support, empathy, and connectedness with these individuals led to positive feelings towards school and enhanced motivation and engagement. There were some aspects within these relationships that deterred motivation and engagement such as peer criticism, non-interactive teachers, and overly involved parents. The student perceptions of each dimension are discussed in further detail below.

Peer Relationships

The findings contribute to the current literature on peer influence and academic motivation and engagement. Students reported positive, valuable relationships with their peers and in turn, seeing their friends was one of the main reasons for wanting to be in school for nearly all students. Often just being in the presence of their friends led to engaging in their studies as they feel comfortable to do so being surrounded by those they feel valued by. Feeling well liked by others provided a positive environment for students to work in which demonstrates emotional engagement and adds to the previous research completed by Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) Emotional engagement for these students consisted of feeling well-liked and cared about by others along with a desire to be around their peers which overall enhanced engagement. As far as academic motivation, looking forward to seeing friends outside of school increased motivation to get through their day and complete their work. Unlike the previous research completed by Ryan (2001), it was not evident that students selected a peer group based on academic performance similarities. Instead, these results indicate that friends were selected based on the quality of the person and the positivity in the relationship. This also implies the difficulty students must face in regards to a desire to be in school when they feel unvalued by

peers or do not have a peer group which supports them. It is understandable the academic challenges they must face when they struggle socially as well. Overall, these results demonstrate that socializing can be a driving force behind a student's desire to be in school, engage in school, and be motivated to complete the tasks at hand.

Previous research has identified various peer influences, including socialization and friends' problem behaviors, as having negative influence on motivation and engagement (Ryan, 2001; Veronneau & Dishion, 2011). The participants in this study did not identify those specific peer behaviors. Only a few students could recall times when peers negatively impacted their engagement and even then, students still did not see the entire classroom environment significantly negatively impacted by those minimal experiences. However, negative peer judgment in the form of teasing did lead to times of disengagement in school as supported by previous research (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005). Results in this study indicated only some interactions with peers lead to avoidance towards school work and distraction during the day, and this appeared to only be short-term. When students were confronted by conflict with peers or the possibility of embarrassment, they would avoid opportunities to engage. It appeared that students care what others think about them and, at times, it was easier to avoid situations and disengage when they felt insecure or judged by others. These results could provide awareness to teachers/parents asking why students appear disengaged and unmotivated as it provides some indication that peer influence plays a role and not just teachers, parents, or subject matter.

Teacher-Student Relationship

Goodenow and Grady (1993) defined belonging as feeling respected and valued within the school community and Nichols (2008) found a positive relationship between feelings of and academic success. Students in this study also described feelings of belonging and how these

feelings positively contribute to their overall engagement and motivation. Forming a connection with teachers during middle school is imperative and as this study revealed, this connection can create positive feelings towards academics. When teachers can relate to students, take time to understand their perspective, acknowledge their efforts, and empathize with them, students have a stronger desire to be involved in school. This is in part because students spend most of their day with teachers and, therefore, they need to feel valued by their teachers.

In particular, for the younger students, talking about topics outside of subject material and providing opportunities for students to bond with teachers provided a comfortable experience for students and encouraged engagement. This sheds light on the need for younger students especially to establish a relationship with an adult as they transition into a middle school setting and often need additional guidance in this process. They come from an elementary school setting where they have one teacher for the day and now in middle school they are spending time with various adults in different settings. Forming these relationships with teachers provides stability and structure for them, which increases their desire to want to be in school and do well.

Additionally, if students were aware that teachers valued their job and demonstrated effort and enthusiasm in their work, they would instill similar values to school. These results further indicate the power of teacher influence because when students saw effort, motivation, and engagement on behalf of the teachers, they too would demonstrate those actions. This was similar to the Siegle et al. (2014) study which participants felt motivated in class when teachers appeared passionate and committed to their profession. Participants in the Siegle et al. (2014) study also identified the importance of variety in teaching strategies to engagement and motivation which also was found to be important in this current study. Teacher disengagement

was seen by non-interactive moments (i.e. providing worksheets) and this could create not only boredom in the classroom, but the perception that teachers were uninterested in their work as well as uninterested in the students.

Having fun in class was described by not only completing fun tasks like games and hands-on projects, but also experiencing humorous moments with teachers and excitement from the teachers. When these moments happened, students focused and appreciated the experience, leaving them wanting more experiences with the teacher. This implies that it is not all about how teachers teach but more about creating moments where students can see the authentic character of the teacher.

Students thought if they completed tasks, participated in class, and followed the rules, there would be a mutual understanding if mistakes were made and teachers would be more willing to empathize with them. These results could imply that students are aware that the teacher is the authority figure in the class, however, when teachers relate to them on an equal level, they value their work more. When students are treated like all people and are comfortable making mistakes, they will try more and do more in school. Students also believed that when students don't try hard in their academics, they potentially deserve a lower level of support from teachers at times. It was evident that teachers' opinions mattered to them and when teachers knew they tried hard in school, students believed these efforts led to a more valuable relationship with teachers. It is also apparent from these results that students struggle with negative consequences.

At times negative consequences in academics work in favor of motivation and engagement, for these students it did not. An interesting finding in this study was that for some students when teachers maintained strict expectations for completing work and lacked empathy,

at times, this negatively impacted their academic motivation. These results indicate that students believe when teachers apply negative reinforcement, they lack an understanding about what it is like to be a student and have a lot of responsibilities. Therefore, this formed a resistance towards school work for students. Students' perceptions on negative reinforcement could also resemble a disconnect between the outside world and life in school for students. The reality is that there are consequences when personal responsibilities are not fulfilled and if students are not shown this in school, they could continue to be resistant and unable to reach their full potential in life.

Parental Support

A very important result of this study which significantly demonstrated the value of the parent-child relationship was the fact that nearly all students considered a parent or guardian a role model. Students identified parents/guardians as role models based on the relationship they had with them as well as the relationship building characteristics he/she had with others. This further indicates the value students play on characteristics in which they can resonate with. Only a few students mentioned the academic or career related success of their role models and they focused more on how the individual demonstrates positive characteristics. Due to the fact that students held their guardians in such high regard, it is not surprising that parents played a role in students' level of engagement and motivation. More importantly, these beliefs imply that because the relationship seems positive and fulfilling, students trust parental guidance in academics.

Positive reinforcement was a positive influence on academics amongst all students in the study and students seemed to respond better to fewer performance expectations. Performance expectations seemed to be better instilled when they were derived from the student themselves verses when parents enforced them, and this was more evident with older students. Like

Simons-Morton and Chen (2009), this autonomy type parenting style enhanced motivation in the older students in this study. Younger students relied more on an authoritative parenting style which consisted of higher expectations and greater involvement in academics. These results could indicate the importance of providing students with praise, encouragement, and rewards, while also providing them with the opportunities to determine how they want to perform in school. Giving students that independence could essentially mean more to them and drive them to work harder in school as long as they understand their parents will acknowledge their efforts as well. Overall, it appeared that with the students in this sample, even a poor grade did not create lack of motivation or engagement especially when students knew that parents understood they tried hard and would make the effort to do better next time.

Academic Performance and Goal Setting

All students mentioned the impact of achieving good grades to being academically motivated in school. Even when students mentioned instances of obtaining lower grades, they still demonstrated motivation and engagement in school as they had an even stronger need to make improvements. This was very evident for the older adolescents in their discussion on establishing academic goals and steps to reach these goals in order to achieve overall academic and career related success in the future. Older students would comment on a set grade they wanted to obtain and in order to do so they had to complete x, y, and z. They were also able to discuss long term goals and how their actions now affect those goals later in life. Younger students had a very difficult time identifying goals and how goals can contribute to motivation in school. This could imply that older students are better able to comprehend the connection between motivation and academic success to future academic/career related planning. These results further revealed the “here-and-now” mindset of younger middle school students. Often

they were able to describe that they obtained a good grade but were unsure how they got there and how establishing motivational goals could play a part in performance. These students appeared to only be able to identify what they are doing now in school and how these experiences impact them in the moment and less on what could happen in the future. This further highlights the importance of capturing the here-and-now moments with younger youth because that is what they live in. Therefore, using that mindset as teachers and parents could be most effective in motivating them. On the other hand, these results demonstrate the need for educating younger students on the connection between their education and future planning. In doing so, students can begin to conceptualize the relationship between school engagement and academic motivation to their overall success or desires for success.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the sample size of ten makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the larger population. Also, most of the participants in this study are average to above average and high achieving students. Their perspectives on motivation and engagement appeared to be somewhat positive as they generally do well academically and enjoy school overall. Additionally, the results were combined with all grade levels and significant differences between the grade levels were not considered. This eliminates the potential to determine any connection or relationship between any developmental factors and motivation and engagement. Another limitation of this study is the fact that only the perspective of the students was determined. Including the input of parents, teachers, and administration may have also provided valuable data in regards to motivation and engagement.

Recommendations

This study highlighted the students' needs for positive and valuable relationships during early adolescence. From an educational perspective, these interpersonal connections can create positive feelings towards school. School counselors, educators, and families can play a pivotal role in enhancing academic motivation and engagement by establishing academically and emotionally supportive relationships with students during their middle school experience.

School counselors are imperative as they can foster relationships with students on a personal level in order to further obtain students' perspectives on social/emotional challenges present in their lives. With this feedback, counselors can maintain the knowledge and awareness gained from students in order to educate school personnel and families. Additionally, counselors can work with students to gain knowledge about the impact of interpersonal struggles to academic motivation to enhance their own self-awareness in order to encourage change and growth. It is also recommended that school counselors work directly with students to educate them on the importance of self-motivation (i.e. goal setting) and how being motivated plays a part in their identified future goals.

The research suggests that by developing a positive classroom environment which includes cognitive and emotional support, students will want to engage more and be more motivated towards their work. This environment can be established by both the teachers and the students. Therefore, it is recommended, that educators create opportunities for relationship building with students in the classroom. This includes teachers bonding with students and well as peers bonding with peers. Educators also have the abilities to connect subject material to real world situations as well as teach students the importance of their education to their future dreams and desires. These lessons could encourage motivation and engagement in school.

It is recommended that guardians utilize academically and emotionally supportive parental behaviors with their children in order to motivate students. When doing this, guardians will be able to gain knowledge in regards to their child's motivational behaviors or lack thereof and collaborate with school personnel to provide support and intervene as appropriate.

Focusing on middle school students' personal beliefs and experiences could offer a better understanding of the social aspects of motivation and engagement during a time of increasing academic and social pressures for youth. It is necessary for educators, counselors, and guardians to not only learn about what it takes to enhance students' engagement and motivation, but to also focus on building relationships and an environment which students feel connected, heard, and understood. These are often experiences that students will carry with them throughout their academic endeavors and throughout their lives.

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