REFEREED ARTICLE

The Importance of Student Engagement in the Middle Years

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Abstract

The importance of student engagement in schools is ever-increasing, particularly in the middle years area. Student achievement is directly linked to a student's level of engagement. Middle years teachers have a responsibility to work hard to understand the needs of their adolescent students, establish connections with their students, and provide them with the opportunities to become decision makers in their own education. Building relationships with students, providing rich educational experiences, and creating positive learning environments are the keys to student engagement, which leads to student success in the middle years.

Student engagement is a major concern for educators and researchers. Student engagement is understood as connecting students to school and their learning. Improved engagement brings improved learning, self-esteem, and commitment to school (Manitoba Education, 2010). The success of students in the middle years is directly linked to their level of engagement (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2007). When a student becomes disengaged in school, it is usually during the early adolescence stage of middle years, and continues to decline into high school. Disengaged students may choose to drop out of school. It is important for middle years educators to understand the influences and choices that can improve student engagement so they influence students positively, which may keep students in school until graduation. Middle years students are unique in their engagement needs. The needs of the developing adolescent require a deep understanding from educators. Students need to participate in their education, and be included in making decisions that affect their learning. Involving students in the planning, implementing, and assessment stages encourages student engagement. Students need to establish relationships with their families, peer groups, and teachers that influence them in positive ways. When educators take the time to include these steps in their classrooms, it can enhance students' commitment to, connection to, and engagement in learning.

Understanding Adolescents

The first key of student engagement, which is developing a deeper understanding of young adolescents, assists educators in understanding why middle years students are the way they are. Students at this age level are experiencing major changes in their bodies, brain development, limited reasoning skills, and possibly mental health issues, which can result in behaviours that are deemed undesirable in classrooms. Puberty is a difficult stage for most adolescents. Hormonal changes in the body can cause great emotional highs and lows that can greatly affect the student's ability to function in the classroom (Manitoba Education, 2010). Middle years students are also dealing with developing brains that can cause them to act impulsively. Impulse behaviours may have small or large consequences that could potentially affect a student's life for the long term. Mental health issues often surface during adolescence, which can have a negative impact on school performance. Students with mental health issues, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, anxiety and other disorders, may struggle with attendance and school performance (Manitoba Education, 2010). Students also demonstrate the need for independence during adolescence, but still need to feel valued and respected. It is crucial that middle years educators understand the unique developmental stage of their students so that they know what their students are experiencing, and are sensitive to the

unique needs that can arise for individual students.

Student Empowerment in Education

Students who participate in their education are engaged by the feeling of empowerment that they experience when involved in planning their own learning, and can make decisions about their learning and lives (Bland et al., 2009). Middle years educators who use students' background knowledge, interests, and incorporate this information in their lesson planning are providing rich learning experiences for their students. Rich learning experiences are engaging because they provide students with a "voice and choice" (Manitoba Training, 2010, p. 25) in their learning. Multiliteracy projects are an example of rich and engaging learning experiences. Such projects provide students the opportunity to immerse themselves in activities that are "community-based, cross-curricular and connected to students' complex textual lives" (Ryan, 2008, p. 191). The design of such projects incorporates the use of various communication media, a variety of text, such as video or mobile communication, and "computer speak," which can also engage students. Students work from self, or group-developed research questions that are relevant to their lives and that address issues and concerns valid to their worlds. Students must work collaboratively to discover the various ways to the answer the question. Students share their findings and demonstrate their learning by using the communication media of their choice. A multiliteracy project also supports students by giving them responsibility in their learning while incorporating the learning of academic skills (Ryan, 2008). Middle years educators who implement such approaches are encouraging students to make decisions about their lives and learning, and incorporating the interests and strengths of students, which are all keys to engaging a learner.

Differentiated instruction is also a technique that can assist teachers in engaging and empowering their students. Utilizing differentiated instruction techniques such as oral presentations in place of tests or the use of e-readers with text-to-voice functionality, can particularly engage struggling learners because they now have a way to "show what they know." Collaborative groups are another differentiated technique that can engage learners in several different ways. This technique can facilitate socialization, provide support when students are struggling, and can give high achieving students opportunities to assist their peers. The list of differentiated instructional techniques that can be used in the classroom is endless, and invaluable when trying to engage struggling learners. Hands-on experiments and design projects from the Manitoba curriculum are simple differentiated instruction techniques to incorporate in a middle years program, because they are already set up for educators to utilize in their classrooms with engagement in mind. The process of including students in the design of assignments and assessment rubrics is another method of differentiated instruction. Including learners in the design of assignments and assessments engages learners because they are aware of what the assignment needs to look like and the value of each different aspect of the assignment. Students are engaged and empowered because they have more control over what their learning looks like. Providing rational for assignments, connecting tasks to the student's world and interests, involving students to participate in the design of the task and the assessment process, and facilitating collaboration among students (Stipek, 2002) are powerful aspects of student empowerment that teachers can implement to engage learners in the middle years.

Positive Interpersonal Relationships

Middle years students are greatly affected by the people who surround them. Students spend more time with their teachers and peers than they do with their own families; therefore, it is important that students establish relationships that make a positive impact on their lives. Peer influences peak in adolescence (Molley et al., 2010), which makes the middle years an

extremely important time for positive interactions between students and their families, teachers, and peers.

Parental attachment plays an important role in student engagement. The emotional resources and skills parents teach their children "persists into adolescence" (Elmore & Huebner, 2010), even as the time spent with parents' declines. Strong attachments to both family and friends are connected to the highest levels of self-esteem (Carter et al., 2007). High levels of self-esteem are associated with a high academic self-concept, which is connected to higher levels of academic engagement and achievement. Children who are happy and secure at home tend to be happy and secure at school, which can be reflected in their academic endeavours, and most often translates into students that are engaged in their learning. The level of positive connections with family can have a large impact on the types of choices adolescents make. The ability of middle years students to make positive choices can greatly influence their level of engagement in the classroom.

Teachers also play an integral role in student engagement. A positive relationship with a teacher can personalize school for many learners and improve their feeling of connection to school and learning, both key aspects in being engaged (McClure et al., 2010). Many schools have recently begun to find ways, such as looping and advisory groups, to give teachers and students time to build relationships. The technique of looping puts a teacher with the same group of students for a period of two to three years. Looping provides many unique opportunities for relationship building. Teachers learn about students as individuals, understand the individual academic strengths and needs of students, and build on this knowledge for more than one year (Jewett, 2009). Looping also eliminates the six to eight-week period that teachers often spend familiarizing themselves with their students each year. Due to the positive bond that forms, along with the extra time that looping provides for students and teachers to be together, students are often in an engaged state for extended periods of time, which may result in higher academic achievement.

Advisory groups are student-teacher mentoring programs that also encourage positive relationships. The goal of advisory groups is to "create tighter relationships between adults and students to foster a more supportive school climate overall" (McClure et al., 2010, p. 5). Advisory groups can assist students in feeling that they are part of a more personalized learning experience, and can motivate students to achieve academically (McClure et al., 2010). Building strong relationships encourages students and teachers to nurture high academic expectations, mutual responsibility, and respect. Strong relationships also provide opportunities for positive collaboration between students and teachers. Students want relationships with their teachers. Students work "harder and smarter" (Maiers, 2011, "Relationships," para. 17) when they understand that their education matters to their teachers. The feeling of being valued and respected plays a key role in building relationships between students and teachers. These interpersonal relationships are integral to students feeling connected to their learning, and therefore, also to being engaged in their learning.

Relationships with friends can also play a major role in a student's ability to be engaged in learning. At a time of life when adolescents are trying to discover who they are, peers may actually be the biggest influence in their lives. Positive and supportive peer relationships can nurture positive academic growth, just as negative relationships with peers can influence academic struggles. The influence that friends can have during the middle years is so strong that it can "both undermine the effects of positive parenting and detract from the negative role of uninvolved parenting styles" (Li et al., 2011, p. 330). Parents, administrators, and teachers must be aware of this powerful influence and foster positive team building opportunities among learners. Encouraging participation in extra-curricular activities such as student government, sports, and music programs can provide the opportunity for students to meet other people with similar interests on which to build positive peer relationships. Teachers and administrators must also be cognizant of the negative situations that can affect middle years students. Bullying can have a great impact on the adolescent students' abilities to be engaged in their learning, either

as the bully or the victim (Li et al., 2011). All adults in the students' lives must provide support, and educate students on the impact bullying can have on their lives. It is also important to educate students on the effects of poor life-style choices, such as drugs and alcohol, and provide support to choose the positive alternative when faced with difficult choices. The influence that peers have on one another can greatly affect levels of student engagement throughout the middle years, both positively and negatively. Positive relationships, with both adults and peers, can support learners through the middle years to stay engaged, committed, and connected to their education.

Conclusion

Student engagement is a factor in the middle years students' academic success. Educators need to understand the unique needs and developmental stages of their students to engage their learners. Encouraging students to participate in their education and including them in the development of rich learning experiences that are real to their environment motivates students to exercise their independence, and engages learners. Whether teachers use large, cross-curricular projects, like multiliteracy projects, or simple differentiated instruction techniques, they will be encouraging engagement of learners. Students also need to be provided with time and support to build and nurture positive relationships with teachers and peers. These relationships are increasingly important due to a decline in the time that middle years students spend with family. All of these factors can be utilized to provide a positive learning environment in the middle years. Positive learning environments lead to engaged learners who are more likely to achieve academically, and look at school as a place they want to be. Engaged learners are learners who are connected to, and committed to, learning for the remainder of their school years.

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