

Ed 790 Action Research
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How can I, as an 8th grade teacher, solve the disengagement of so many of my students and find a way to attain successful learning by all members of my student community?

The Driving Question above is far from being a unique query. The issue of disengaged and unmotivated students goes back for generations. There have always been students who do not feel that school is relevant to their lives and often choose, eventually, to either engage and become students or dropout. There have always been jobs people could find that provide an income and a way to make it in the world.

The difference today is that students who disengage are putting themselves at a terrible disadvantage. The world today is no longer one in which one can make it with no education and no training. Learning the 3Rs is no longer enough. Students need to be able to read and synthesize information that was inconceivable even 10 years ago. They need to be able to make informed choices about what they need to know every minute of their waking lives.

There is so much information available to students. There is so much stimuli for them to deal with on a moment to moment basis. They are barraged from birth with a constant, multi-layered stream of banter, some useless and some vitally important, to know. It is difficult for anyone, who has not been educated, to be able to figure out what is important to know and what is not. It takes almost unfathomable amounts of direction and purpose to learn how to sort through the muck. This is difficult for a child growing up in a nurturing environment, with human needs being met. But, if a child is growing up in a situation with any adversity or difficulty, the ability to deal with all this must be very confusing and wires must get crossed constantly.

This daunting task of sorting out information and basic categorization of human knowledge (useless, harmful, beneficial, imperative, ridiculous, vital, etc) is the initial job of the parents and families. Then, the job continues with primary and elementary school. At that point, it is the teachers who need to facilitate the ability to sort out information, with the assistance of family. But, what if there is no family assistance? What if the students are on their own when they leave school? What if they have to

create their own filter of what is useless, harmful, beneficial, imperative, ridiculous, etc?

Then comes Middle School. Students, at this point, are physically changing. They are self-identifying. They are measuring who they are in relation to their peers. That is nothing new. What is new is that they are measuring who they are by what they are hearing and seeing from millions of different sources, not just from their immediate world. Students are accessing information from places and people who have no context or meaning to their lives. Students are looking at and reading things that most adults today never, in their middle schools years, imagined existed - some of it frightening - some of it wondrous. By eighth grade, students have been exposed to so much. Hopefully, they have a well-developed filter in place, but unfortunately, for many, many reasons, some do not. There also exists the prurient curiosity of adolescents. It used to be one could access Dad's "Playboys" behind the barn to satisfy that curiosity. Now everything and anything is available.

The fact is, that many students are overwhelmed by information, and because of that they are almost paralyzed with the difficulty of sorting out who they should become or who they should believe. Adolescents are not lazy by nature. Often they are just confused by all the mixed messages they are receiving.

The purpose of the study I am involved in is to uncover answers and perhaps some viable solutions to the increasing lack of motivation in students in the eighth grade at my school. I see this problem mainly among Hispanic males. I want to find out if the problem has to do with too much information, too many or too few expectations, family dynamics, cultural norms, peer interactions, self-image in comparison with the larger world.

The behavior that I have observed, and been a part of, in recent years is that a group of middle school boys spend a great deal of their time bringing each other down. They are rude to others and very disrespectful of authority of any kind. They are, for the most part, completely checked out of academics and have no apparent remorse, or even guilt, for having done no work at all in school. We have always had this problem with a small group, but now it is becoming a much larger problem with a much larger group of boys. It is almost as if they have given up already. They feel that they know everything because they been exposed to so much. They really have! They are quick to access any information on their phones or devices and find what is being taught in school utterly irrelevant and stupid.

They are, in some ways, correct. Yet, and I will return to my first paragraph, they

believe firmly that they have what they need to be successful in life, but they do not know how to think and synthesize all that information they are absorbing. They have no clue how to read a manual or how to follow directions or how to prepare for their future. They are certain that they are ready for the world. This class is not alone in its ways. The upcoming classes are full of students who do not feel the need to do any work. More than ever. Is it information fatigue?

One thing that stands out for me is the importance of building relationships with these students. At our school, we have put into place several strategies to help in building relationships among our students.

We have in place a schedule that allows for meetings with parents, grade level teams, the principal, the counselor and the students during the school day.. It has been very effective to have a group that is advocating for the student.

We have "Family Groups" every Wednesday morning for a half hour. Each teacher has a mixed group of 14-15 students who come together with an all-school agenda, covering topics like respect, racism, bullying. There is also included time for games and check-ins. This has been going on for three years and it seems to be successful and rewarding for most students. Our disenfranchised students are still just that. It may be working, but they would never let us know if it was making any difference at all.

Another strategy that has been put into place is a lunch meeting, once a week, with teachers and a group of students who have been identified as academically at risk. There are six such groups each Thursday and there are about 4 to 5 students per group. The success rate is, once again, hard to gauge. Many of the failing students are still failing despite the intervention. Some enjoy the meetings but continue to be disengaged.

There is a CLARO group at our school, but I feel that it is doing nothing for the students (Latino boys). They come together and play soccer and have snacks. I think it needs revamping and needs to be less stereotypical of who Latinos are. Sometimes I think that therein lies many of the boys' issues - cultural stereotypes that seem to perpetuate in middle school.

We have a Safe School Ambassadors Program that has been in place for 9 years. It is an anti-bullying program that has been somewhat successful, but still has flaws because of a general lack of respect that exists among a portion of the student body.

The district arranged for “Listening Circles” to hear what students had to say about their school environment. This engendered some good conversation because students were able to talk to administrators about what they see happening on our campus, both academically and socially.

I plan to touch on these strategies when I am discussing the issues in greater depth.

Our staff is very talented and open to any suggestions to make our students learn more effectively. There is no issue with immutability among the teachers. All are life-long learners and are very eager to solve this problem. I hope that through this research I find some creative solutions to our dilemma of student disengagement and disrespect. The parent community needs to be strengthened and better educated about parenting adolescents. We need to educate them on what this new “digital teenager” is all about...as soon we educate ourselves.

Review of Related Literature:

The purpose of this project is to explore the possible reasons that 20% of this 8th grade class is not engaged in their learning. I found several interesting articles that really gave me different perspectives on Latino youth engagement. Theme 2 has to do with engaging the community and parents into the spheres of all students. Theme 3 is focused on Challenge-Based Learning (CBL), a possible solution to the issue of non-engagement by allowing students to become involved in multi-disciplined projects with the purpose of creating awareness and implementing change within their world. I am very interested in pursuing, for my Capstone Project, a Challenge Based Project for Fall 2015 which will either focus on Water or Food.

In all my readings and research, I am finding that, in this era of information overload, it is imperative that we, as educators, take heed of what our students are saying to us. Their education has to have relevance and meaning in relation to the world. They need to learn how to be citizens of the world and not just regurgitators of rote knowledge. We need to teach them how to filter information and how not to get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data and junk that is out there.

I have found that listening is vital to relationships with students and that often one needs to step back and remember that the old way of educating students, that worked until about 15 years ago, is gone. I do feel that we need to do more to engage all students and that it is equally important to engage the parents and families.

Theme 1: This literature review will address the areas related to youth engagement and ways to identify the reasons for this lack of motivation.

Article 1 “Closing Gaps Opening Doors”

- Posnick-Goodwin, S. (2014, March). Closing Gaps Opening Doors. *California Educator*
- Summary

The purpose of this article was to describe the efforts of a middle school in Moreno Valley, CA to improve the motivation/achievement of their African American students. The school created clubs specifically for them like Junior Black Achievers, which meets regularly before school and has guest speakers and community members offering support. This continues to the high school. Another key factor is this successful program is parent participation. The program is not exclusively African-American anymore; Latinos and whites have been participating.

The results have been noticeably higher achievement among all students because of greater confidence and higher skills. It makes a huge difference having the community demonstrating solid support for these students. I feel this approach to bolstering student achievement is logical and really smart. These students want to learn and achieve, but get bogged down by their “perceived status” in the community.

Article 2 “Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement”

- Hill, Nancy and Diana Tyson. "Parental Involvement in Middle School:A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement.." *Developmental Psychology*. vol 45.3 (2009): 740-763. Web
- Summary

This article is in a journal that looks very interesting. I was definitely interested in the premise that it is proven that parent involvement in Middle School students lives is one of the main keys for success in achievement. The article states that parental involvement in academic socialization and not homework help is very successful in raising student motivation. The procedures involved were observing parental involvement in many middle schools to find what makes students successful. Across 50 studies, parental involvement proved to be key in a time when student achievement declines and academic success is so important. My analysis is that this is so important

and I want to study this concept further and implement some programs for parent involvement in my school.

Article 3 New Perspective on Student Engagement

- Hall, J. (2015, April). New Perspective on Student Engagement. *Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)*
- Summary: This article, which is very timely, suggests several means to improving student motivation in Middle School. The author reminds us of a system which provides several strategies for student success. Using the acronym SCORE (Success, Curiosity, Originality, Relationships, and Energy), this student engagement model, which they describe in a 1995 *Educational Leadership* article titled "Strengthening Student Engagement: What Do Students Want (And What Really Motivates Them)?" combines intrinsic and extrinsic motivation so often separated in most theories of student motivation. There are three types of student engagement: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. The article provides explanations for all of the above. The results would be a more comprehensive approach to educating Middle School students and ensuring greater success in engaging them all.
- My thoughts on this article are that it makes sense. We do tend to downplay the importance of Middle School engagement by saying that this time of life is painful, and therefore should be lived through and tolerated. It is not true. Students need to be successful in Middle School so they can go on to High School feeling prepared.

Article 4: "Motivating Young Adolescents."

- Wormel, R. (2014, September 1). Motivating Young Adolescents. *Educational Leadership*, 26-31.
- Summary: This article is about what is the key to motivating adolescents. The author gives six great tips and ideas for student motivation in middle school. They include
 1. "Adopt Two Mindsets - substitute manipulation for motivation and remember that "There's no such thing as laziness. Humans are hard-wired to do demanding and complex things. Young adolescents are developmentally primed for learning things that are intellectually and physically advanced and for getting excited about their growing expertise and the freedoms that come with competence." (Wormel, 2014)
 2. "Empathize and Build Trust."
 3. "Remember Where They Are."
 4. "Give Descriptive Feedback."
 5. "Teach the Way the Mind Learns."
 6. "Tell Stories and Spark Curiosity."
- My thoughts are that this article is well expressed. The author is basically stating that students who are unmotivated can be stimulated and excited by learning if the teachers

can be consistent with following and integrating the six strategies cited.

Theme 2: The second section will focus on research about the climate within the Napa Valley, or even within St. Helena itself and strategies to engage parents and the community more in their students' learning.

Article 1 "Cultural Attributes and Adaptation Linked to Achievement Motivations Among Latino Adolescents"

- Ibanez, G. (2004). Cultural Attributes and Adaptation Linked to Achievement Motivations Among Latino Adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33(6), 559-568

Summary: This article, though it does not specifically relate to the Napa Valley, discusses the attributes among Latinos that often cause them to be less motivated and, and therefore, less successful in an academic environment. Academic competence, school belonging, and parental involvement are all key to success. This article discusses Latinos, who were born in the United States and who speak English, and have culturally adapted, still need the added benefit of school belonging to make them feel supported and confident. This group still needs programs to boost academic competence.

My analysis of this is that, yes, the group having the most difficulty in our schools right now are the Latino males who are multi-generational Americans. Yes, they need enhanced academic help and more parent involvement. Many of the parents of these boys are hard working people, many of whom attended the St. Helena schools. What is the cost of cultural adaptation?

Article 2 "Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education"

- Zurate, M.E. (2007). Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education: Perceptions, Expectations, and Recommendations. *Report - Time Warner*,

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502065.pdf> The findings of this study indicated that divergent definitions and perceptions of parental involvement in education exist among the different stakeholders. Moreover, the findings revealed that schools lack clear organizational goals and objectives on how best to involve parents in the schools. These insights can inform discussions about how schools can best acknowledge, encourage, and increase parental involvement in schools. School administrators, school board members, corporate school partners, policymakers, outreach programs, parent leaders, and teachers will discover the findings of the study useful as they seek to increase parental involvement in schools. The

article gives real recommendations for increasing parental involvement in the schools. I see another way to increase parental involvement is to have parents come in and demonstrate their expertise on topics being studied in real-world project.

Interview with Students: I spoke with four students, three are 8th grade boys, one is a sixth grade girl. All are Hispanic. I changed all the names. This interview took place on April 23, 2015 in my classroom.

Why do you think student do not care?

Jorge : There are three types of students:

- Those who do care, but are overwhelmed.
- Those who are trying to fit in.
- Those who do not want to care, even though they do.

Lupita:

- There are those who are just trying to fit in.
- There is too much going on at night. They are tired.
- There are those who are depressed.

Juan:

- Too many videos games or tv at night. They get into their games and then do not get to sleep until late.
- They interrupt class and are rude so they can keep others from learning.
- Some kids do not try hard and they get behind and then they get frustrated.

Francisco:

- Colleges do not care about middle school so why try?
- Parents do not care.

Theme 3: Finally, the third section will focus on implementation of Challenge Based Learning as a possible strategy to excite and involve all students.

Article 1 Challenge-Based Learning <https://challengebasedlearning.org/pages/welcome>

- (2009,). Take Action and Make a Difference. *Challenge-Based Learning Home*.

Retrieved March 31, 2015, from <https://challengebasedlearning.org/pages/welcom>

Summary: Challenge Based Learning is an engaging multidisciplinary approach to teaching and learning that encourages students to leverage the technology they use in their daily lives to solve real-world problems through efforts in their homes, schools and communities.

The purpose of CBL is to engage students in a real-world way that requires thought and

consideration of solutions to problems all students encounter in their everyday lives. The procedures involve developing a topic and a driving question and using the The Challenge-Based Learning Classroom Guide as a template.

https://challengebasedlearning.org/public/toolkit_resource/02/0e/0df4_af4e.pdf?c=f479

I see this type of teaching and learning as a solution for non-engagement among our students. I hope to create a project and implement it in our classrooms in the Fall of 2015.

Article 2 Challenge Based Learning, An Approach for Our Time

J.L.F. (2009,). *Challenge Based Learning: An Approach for Our Time*. Retrieved April 19, 2015, from <http://www.nmc.org/pdf/Challenge-Based-Learning.pdf>

- Review

- Purpose - “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” — A Nation at Risk This says it all. We have spent so much time politicizing education that we have missed the point of educating students to promote a democracy.
- Challenge based learning makes learning relevant to the world students live in. They, in theory, should engage more deeply in their learning if the results mean something to themselves and who they are as members of our society.
- Results - the article discusses the results in many of the schools that piloted the program. Overall, the results were really significantly improved over “traditional” learning.
- From this report, it is very obvious that Project-based Learning works, and not only that, it makes sense.