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'It's gotta be something I want': Reflections of a Disengaged Middle-School Student!

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Abstract

This research project is the culminating conversation about a ten-month interaction between a teacher and a typically disengaged student. An interview design focusing on David, a fifteen-year-old who has spent four years completing three grades of middle school, was employed to determine his reflections on his recent success and his thoughts on what makes an engaging classroom. Data was gathered solely from the interview, and the data was analyzed using constant comparison.

Findings indicate a clear connection between the types of teaching methodologies employed by teachers and the level of student engagement. Increased student engagement is negatively correlated with the amount of distracting behaviors. Finally, David provided strong definitions of the characteristics that make an engaging classroom.

Introduction

Having known David and his family for many years, I was pleased when he finally made it into my class during his eighth-grade term. It had been a longer journey for him than for most because he failed in his first attempt at seventh grade and was forced to repeat. During the second-go-round, he did much better in terms of his grades, but he still struggled on the North Carolina End of Grade Tests. In addition, the school administration and his previous teachers had identified him as a troublemaker, and most of the eighth-grade teachers hoped they did not have to teach him. He was known to disrupt class, crack jokes at the wrong times, and distract the people around him. I, on the other hand, looked forward to the challenge because I knew David as a bright but troubled student with a difficult past. I felt strongly that I could help him to see a promising future.

This interview is the culminating report of a year we spent together as teacher and student on a unique academic team and in a classroom I purposefully designed to be engaging. Admittedly, I am biased toward this participant because I have seen how much effort he has exerted and am aware of how much further he can go. I believe he is typical of many of our students, who are disengaged from their education because the system is not designed to engage them, and, although other teachers like to categorize him as a unique case, I genuinely think his opinions represent much of what other students would like to say if they had the chance. He is a remarkable example of what engaging classrooms can do to inspire traditionally disengaged students.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of student engagement dates to the 1970s, during which time scholars began to examine the effectiveness of different methods of pedagogy. They focused initially on what they termed behavioral engagement. In these models, researchers tried to measure the amount of time in which students followed the school and classroom rules and procedures (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). By the early 1990s, however, Fred Newmann (1992) and Jeremy Finn (1993) began to question the validity of these measures. Newmann argued student engagement is much more complicated than a simple behavioral construct. Instead, he believed research should focus on the levels of emotional and cognitive engagement. Finn and Rock (1997) concurred, determining behavioral engagement does directly correlate to students' scores on achievement tests but is not a good measure of performance on assessments that require a deep understanding of the material. They argued, rather, for a multi-dimensional hierarchy consisting of (1) behavioral engagement, as defined above; (2) emotional engagement, in which students identify the value of school and feel some level of connection to the classroom and/or extracurricular activities; and (3) cognitive engagement, including motivation and effort in the classroom. These measures initiated scholarly discussions regarding the definition of student engagement. These discussions notwithstanding, Newmann (1986) summed it up best when he said "engagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know when it is missing" (p.242).

As researchers have attempted to create this operational definition, they have discovered classrooms in which engagement is present. At the lowest levels of engagement, students are expected to follow the classroom rules, conform to the teacher's standards, and, in truth, fit in. Yet, in cognitively engaged classrooms, "learning isn't neat. It can be messy, unpredictable, and full of challenges" (Zmuda, 2008, p. 38). In order to truly inspire student engagement, teachers must move beyond the measures of behavioral compliance and strive for cognitive creativity. Across the research matrix, engaging schools and classrooms have three primary characteristics: competency, connection, and authenticity (Newmann, 1992; Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Zmuda, 2008; Finn, 1992; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Woodley & Bowen, 2007; Guthrie &

Anderson, 1999; Helme & Clark, 2001; Blumenfeld & Meece, 1998; Marks, 2000). When these characteristics work in tandem, students are engaged and motivated to learn.

Therein lies the problem: American schools are plagued with teaching counterintuitive to these characteristics. Students find themselves in classrooms where teachers consistently lecture, give notes, and assign readings and questions. They are more concerned with “covering the curriculum” than they are with true student learning. As a result, students become disengaged and disruptive. At that point, they become preoccupied with stimuli other than the academic lesson and may even reach a point of defiance where they simply refuse to participate in the school setting. In fact, research suggests between 25 percent (Willms, 2003) and 66 percent (Cothran & Ennis) of students are disengaged. David identifies himself as one of these students. His experiences and insight will allow us to more clearly define the perception of teaching and learning by a student who identifies himself as typically disengaged.

Student Context

David is a student at a large middle school on the edge of an urban area. The school has approximately 1,600 students in three grade levels. David lives in a very rural area on a large farm, with his grandparents and an older brother. His parents have not played any significant role in his life. He calls both of his grandparents “dad” and “mom.” Throughout his school career, he has had poor academic achievement and low standardized test scores. His IQ level, however, is well above average, and therefore he is served by the Exceptional Children’s department. David is classified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and is on medication to help him concentrate. He is older than the rest of the students in his class because he failed to meet the local promotion requirements in the seventh grade and was retained. During the course of his eighth-grade year, David’s grades and participation levels increased dramatically, except for one period in early March, when he experienced a decline. Additionally, in the past, he was referred to the Behavior Management Technician due to a lack of control of his temper and anger. This year, however, save for one incident, he has maintained control.

Participation Selection, Methodology, and Procedures

I selected David for this study using purposive convenience sampling. Based on his past academic and behavioral problems, and his more recent success, he became an interesting case. Additionally, through my yearlong interaction with him, I have noticed patterns of behavior which seem to positively correlate with the types of teaching methodologies used in different classrooms. As a result, he became the candidate I chose for this semi-structured interview.

I interviewed David after school had recessed for the summer. We met at a restaurant near his home approximately two weeks after school let out. After we talked about some mutual friends (I have a close relationship with several members of his extended family), we had lunch and then began the interview process.

Before we met, I generated a list of guiding questions in which I was interested. These included:

- What do you not like about school?
- What do you like about school?
- What is one thing you enjoyed this year?
- What is one thing you hated this year?
- Do you ever have times when you don’t notice time passing?

- What types of activities keep your attention?
- When you don't do well, where do you place the fault?

Although I intended to guide the interview with these questions, I did not constrain myself to them. Consequently, as the interview progressed, I was willing to allow him to guide the conversation. In the end, we covered most of those topics in detail, as well as diverging into numerous other realms.

At the conclusion of the interview, I immediately returned to my office to transcribe the data. I completed the transcription in one sitting, read over the data, and made any notes I deemed important. In addition, I emailed a copy of the transcript to David for his reflection. He did not make any changes and confirmed his responses. The next day, during a long car trip, I listened to the interview recording and made additional mental notes. Finally, when I returned home, I listened to the recording again and added to my reflections.

Several days later, I used constant comparison to look for any trends and/or themes in the transcript. I compared my findings to my field notes and developed a list of several themes which seemed to carry our conversation. Again, I sent David a copy of these themes via email, which he again confirmed.

Findings

Through coding, analysis, and reflection, I uncovered several themes which seemed to permeate David's description of his middle school years. First, he describes the characteristics of students who are typically disengaged and identifies the sources of motivation for those students. In addition, he clearly defines the needs disengaged students have in order to be re-engaged. Second, he separates various types of assignments and teachers into positive and negative categories. Finally, David describes the actions he takes when he becomes disengaged due to perceived negative assignments.

Early in the interview, David took time to be sure I truly understood his self-identity. Before I initially asked him to do this interview, I had explained to his class that the larger topic of my thesis involved student engagement. Additionally, during the course of the school year, I made it a point to clearly define the type of teaching methodology I was using and how it related to their cognitive engagement level. Consequently, David already had an idea of what the topic for the interview was before we even began. He commented that he had taken some time the night before to think about why he was the way he was. As we explored that topic in the interview, he implored, "It's not the fact that I'm lazy and I don't want to do the work" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 2). Instead, he argued, he was like many of the students in the school. He thought he had a short attention span and wanted to experience success, although he demanded the success be accompanied by fun. When I asked him why he had not experienced success during the previous three years he spent in middle school, he decided it was because he had never been forced to set any "extreme goals" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 3). He believes students like him have to have goals, although those goals must be "something I want, not something other people wanted" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 3).

In addition to his self-description, David also clearly articulated several motivating factors he felt teachers should understand. On an extrinsic level, he identified wrestling and track as strong motivators. During the first semester of his eighth-grade year, David worked extremely hard to make sure his grades were high enough to convince his parents he should be allowed to wrestle. He commented,

Like with wrestling, like you know right after the first nine weeks before wrestling season started, how I was actually working, I was working hard, doing all my work, that's because I had a goal and I had a reason to fulfill my academic requirements (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 2).

He accomplished this goal, but as the season began, the athletic director and wrestling coach discovered he was not eligible based on his grades from the second semester of his seventh-grade year. This was a crushing blow to a student who was putting forth tremendous effort. In order to compensate, his parents agreed he would be able to participate in track, and he kept his grades up. But, when tryouts approached, they changed their minds, which changed his entire outlook on school: "When it came time for [tryouts], my parents said, 'No, you're doing too good in your class, you need to focus just on that.' It made me mad, so I just quit doing it." (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 2). Clearly, though, sports at the middle school level did serve as an extrinsic motivator for David.

On an intrinsic level, David confirmed Newman's (1992) belief that when students are involved in their school work, they tend to have a greater understanding of the curriculum. As he recalled lessons from his eighth-grade year, David was able to remember those in which he was active. Specifically, he recounted a social studies lesson in which students were given 150 clues to Abraham Lincoln's assassination and were asked to create a timeline of the events on that day. He believed he was able to remember more about the event than his girlfriend, who was studying the same topic in a different class because he had participated in the work rather than simply copying the notes or reading from a textbook. He also recalled lessons in which he completed science labs and used manipulatives to solve equations in his math class.

In his recollections and analysis of specific lessons, David separates the types of teaching methodologies into perceived positive and negative categories. He placed repetitive homework, assignments from the textbook, taking notes, and reading and answering questions into the negative category. Throughout the interview, he referred to these types of assignments as "crap" and "boring" (Interview transcript, 6/25/06, p. 1). When asked to give this category a definition, he responded that the work did not have a purpose.

Contrastingly, David defined positive work as hands-on assignments which allow students to move around and set their own goals for learning. Specifically, he talked about labs, simulations, and active group work. When asked why these types of assignments were better than the others, he responded, "because I actually get involved with it and I understand it more" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 1). He echoed this sentiment multiple times during the interview, inferring active assignments "lock into your brain more" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 2).

David also categorized teachers into positive and negative groups. Although he did not seem to personally dislike teachers who use a more traditional, lecture-oriented approach, he did question their methods. Particularly, he did not think he moved any information from those classes into long-term memory. Speaking about one of his English classes, he noted, "I barely even remember anything. I just remember enough for the exam and I just kind of get rid of it" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 2).

David did believe, however, that certain teachers have personality traits which make them more engaging. He described engaging teachers as laid back and willing to think on a student's level. He admired their ability to joke with students and their willingness to try to understand why students react the way they do when they are bored. More importantly, though, was a teacher's desire to incorporate fun into the classroom. David strongly believes learning and fun are not mutually exclusive and good teachers "need to make the stuff [curriculum] as much fun as they can. But [they

need to] keep it where the students actually learn something [at the same time]" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 8).

David also identified what students need in order to be successful in school. He reiterated the need for interesting hands-on activities which are fun. Additionally, however, he talked about the need for a purposeful workload which emphasized quality over quantity. Students don't complete their work because they do not understand the purpose of the assignment. When teachers allow for some shared responsibility and decision making, he believes students are more willing to complete the tasks because the "process of doing the work is easier" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 4).

When work doesn't meet these standards, David admitted he becomes disengaged and exhibits distracting behavior: "If you are going to make us sit there for a whole hour and make us do straight work, I'm going to make your life miserable" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 8). When I asked him what happens when he is in class and starts to lose his attention, he responded,

I have to do something to like completely make the teacher mad... Like I have to be the class clown or somebody who has a good sense of humor, and when the teacher's going like "copy this" or something, I have to do something that completely gets on her nerves (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 5).

David does not think he can feel these behaviors coming on, but simply responds when he becomes bored. Once his attention span is exhausted, he must move and distract the teacher in order to be able to refocus, which he thinks he has no problem doing. Although he understands the consequences of these actions, most times he thinks the teacher overreacts. When asked who is at fault during these times, he acknowledged his own responsibility, but also lays part of the blame at the feet of the teacher: "I put [the fault] on myself because I knew I was supposed to pay attention in class, but I came to a certain point where I didn't. And I put it on the teacher for being boring" (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 6).

Conclusions and Implications

David's analysis of his life in middle school is a clear call to teachers that they must make sure their teaching methodologies match the needs of their students. This young man, as bright and articulate as he is, experienced very little success in school because he was rarely involved or challenged in his educational endeavors. For years, he suffered through tedious lessons which had no perceived relevance to his life or his interests. As a result, he quite consciously disengaged from his education, became a distraction, and headed down the path to potentially dropping out of school. Much of this could have been avoided through teacher creativity and intervention.

David also clearly delineated between behavioral and cognitive engagement. The differences between these two define what William Ayers (1998) calls "the excruciating paradox" between education and schooling (p. xxiii). Ayers writes:

Education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities. School is toooften about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional – it asks nothing in return. School routinely demands obedience and conformity and a precondition to attendance. Education is surprisingly unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders (p. xxiii).

David most certainly echoes these sentiments. His lack of understanding of the purpose of the work led to a lack of motivation. This, in turn, created a situation where he was unable to follow the rules of the school consistently, and he was marked as a troublemaker. Nowhere in this formula, however, does any educator really search for the cause of his disenfranchisement. When the school work calls for unconditional obedience, David believes students do not really learn and become distracters. Yet, when the work causes students to be cognitively engaged, they participate. In fact, David goes so far as to correlate action with understanding and says although the work is challenging, the process of completing it is much easier.

Teachers, quite understandably, are uncomfortable with the thought of giving up control in their classrooms to the students. They feel the strong need to guide students strictly through the curriculum and provide the information their students need to be successful. But, if students are not developing clear connections between school work and reality, how successful is this teaching process? Instead, I argue students gain as much content knowledge through active learning as they do through passive learning. Further, these students develop a much deeper understanding of the content because they were involved participants rather than spectators.

During the course of the year in my classroom, David wrote over 200 pages of reflection, read primary source after primary source, sorted information, participated in countless hours of discussion, and even at one point climbed on the roof of the building to claim the land in the name of England. Yet, in our interview, he said he never thought I made him “do much work” (Interview transcript, 6/25/09, p. 3). What a tribute and a message: If teachers are willing to enter into shared partnerships with students and really take the time to create engaging classroom environments, they will realize they do have control over the distractions and behavior problems they spend so much time complaining about.

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