

**Engaging Middle Years Students:
The challenges that middle years teachers face**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
in the Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By
Chris Clark

© Copyright Chris Clark, April 2012. All rights reserved.

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis/dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis/dissertation in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis/dissertation work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis/dissertation or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis/dissertation.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this thesis/dissertation in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies
College of Education
28 Campus Drive
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 0X1

Abstract

In light of the large body of research that exists on the factors that can lead to authentic student engagement, this study focused on the challenges that middle years teachers face in implementing engagement strategies. Ten middle years teachers participated in two focus groups. The participants identified four challenges: time, money and resources, other teachers and administration, and students' lives outside of school. Possible ways to overcome the challenges are shared in the conclusion.

Acknowledgements

Thank-you to my committee members: Dr. Lynn Lemisko for her consistent guidance and support throughout my years of working on my masters; Dr. Janet McVittie and Dr. Tim Molnar for their thought provoking feedback and discussions; Dr. Audrey McKinzel, my external examiner, for pointing out inconsistencies that I overlooked and Dr. Shaun Murphy for chairing my defense.

Thank-you to my teaching partners Gillian Strange and Laurie Jepsen-Martens for their willingness to listen, discuss, debate, disagree, and agree with me as I shared and received ideas from them. Thank-you to my students over that last five years who both benefitted from my research but also benefitted the research.

Thank-you to the Saskatoon Public School Division for granting me an educational leave so that I could complete my Masters in Curriculum Studies.

Finally, thank-you to my wife and children who supported and were patient with the amount of time I had to spend on my Masters and pushed me to finish it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY	1
My Student and Teacher Journey	1
My Let's Lead – Nīkānētān Journey.....	4
My Graduate School Journey.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	9
Defining Engagement	9
Conditions That Invite And Allow Engagement	16
<i>Relationships</i>	16
<i>Collaboration and Relational Learning</i>	18
<i>Adventure Based Learning</i>	20
<i>Project Based Learning</i>	22
My Research Question.....	25
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	27
Theoretical Framework.....	27
Research Methodology	28
Participants.....	30
Procedure	31
Dealing With The Data	33
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA & DISCUSSION.....	36
Results.....	36
What does authentic engagement look like?.....	36
<i>Paying Attention</i>	36

<i>Physical Involvement</i>	38
<i>Caught Up</i>	38
<i>Fun</i>	39
<i>Present and Awake</i>	39
<i>Student Voices</i>	40
<i>Everyone engages differently</i>	40
<i>Summary</i>	41
Factors That Led To Authentic Student Engagement.....	41
<i>Student Competence</i>	41
<i>Being Outside of the School</i>	42
<i>Passionate and Knowledgeable Teachers</i>	43
<i>Autonomy</i>	44
<i>Relevance</i>	44
<i>Experiential Education</i>	45
<i>Summary</i>	46
Challenges to engaging students.....	46
<i>Time</i>	47
<i>Money or Resources</i>	48
<i>Teachers and Administration</i>	49
<i>Student Lives</i>	50
<i>Summary</i>	51
What can be done about the challenges	51
<i>Teacher Collaboration</i>	52

Summary	53
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS.....	54
Engagement Is?.....	54
Factors That Led To Engagement?.....	55
Challenges To Engagement?.....	56
<i>Challenge 1: Time</i>	57
<i>Challenge 2: Resources</i>	59
<i>Challenge 3: Other Staff and Administration</i>	60
<i>Challenge 4: Student Lives Outside of School</i>	61
Areas of Further Research and Work.....	63
Limitations	64
Conclusion	64
REFERENCES	66
APPENDICES	75
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter	75
Appendix B: Consent Form	79
Appendix C: Initial Words and Phrases From Data.....	83
Appendix D: Data Gathered Under Themes.....	87
Appendix E: Excerpts From Focus Group Transcripts.....	95

CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY

My Student and Teacher Journey

Student engagement has been the focus of my entire teaching career and it stems from my own personal experiences as a student. My life experience with school has shaped who I am as a teacher and has had an impact on my research journey. School is not something that I remember enjoying. I did quite well academically (if academics are measured by grades and credits) but I did not enjoy the process. I have never liked desks. I have always loved talking and discussing issues with others. I have never liked listening to long lectures. I have always enjoyed being active and moving around. I have never enjoyed doing repetitive, meaningless work. As a result, school was not a great fit for me. Fortunately for me, I have always enjoyed reading and been good at it, which meant that I could understand all of the assigned work in school, find help when I needed to and have a place to retreat to when I was bored (which was most of the time). I found it very ironic that I would actually get in trouble with teachers because of my reading. Of course, I was often reading when I was supposed to be doing something else, like listening to them lecture.

What was very troubling for me as a student was how I experienced the social structure of the schools I attended, with the big, strong and mean kids at the top and everyone else underneath, with too many teachers oblivious to the problem or worse, perpetuating it. This was exemplified by my grade nine gym teachers whose survival of the fittest way of teaching resulted in me spending most that year, skipping gym class. This discomfort with school lasted until grade 11 when I finally became physically stronger and more self-confident, which meant that my final two years of grade school were tolerable and even enjoyable from a social point of view.

I found university to be more of the same - desks and lectures and assignments that had little connection to the real world. Some of the time, our classrooms would have tables. Some of the time, our classes were participatory, active and even relevant to the real world that we were being prepared for. Most of these were in my first years when I was in the College of Commerce, unlike when I transferred to Education where most of my classes were very transmissive in nature. By the time I graduated with my B.Ed, I was so frustrated by my

experiences in the College of Education that I was attending few of my classes. Through my previous experiences in coaching and training others to be coaches, I was aware of ways to make instruction relevant and engaging and I experienced very little of this throughout the classes I was taking in the College of Education. I remember being in a four hundred level math curriculum class where the instructor spent most of his time teaching us how to do math. The pre-requisites for this course, which I and everyone else had completed, were several advanced mathematics courses. We knew how to do the math. We were in that curriculum class to learn how to teach the math. Two courses that stand out as being engaging and relevant had current teachers in the Saskatchewan school system were the instructors while they were completing their Masters work. They focused on helping us to discover how we were going to teach the curriculum instead of on content. It got to the point where I was finishing my B.Ed. just to spite the college even though I desperately wanted to quit and transfer to some other university. The only reason I remained was that I had just gotten married and my wife was attending the University of Saskatchewan.

As I went out into the real world of teaching, I went armed with all of my experiences and a desire to do things differently. Outside of my schooling, I had been very involved in camping and swimming where I had seen and experienced that active and hands-on learning was a very effective educational experience and that the physical outdoors was a very powerful place to learn. I had some very distinct ideas about how I wanted to teach and what I wanted my classroom to be like. I wanted a noisy classroom. I wanted a classroom where everyone worked with each other. I wanted a safe classroom. I wanted to be on top of as much as possible and keep everyone as safe as possible. I wanted a fun classroom. I wanted a classroom where students wanted and, in fact, looked forward to coming to school. I wanted a classroom where everyone was and felt valued.

My first few years of teaching went fine. I was a substitute or supply teacher for a while, like many teachers are, then did a couple of temporary contracts teaching grade 8. As I was a temporary contract teacher, I did not feel confident being too different from what was accepted as typical teaching practice. I did strive for many of the things on my list, including providing a safe environment and having a busy classroom. It was in the spring of my second year of teaching that I stumbled across Karl Rohnke's (1991) book, *Bottomless Baggie*, which was a

collection of games, initiative tasks and other assorted writings. It was my first taste of Adventure Based Learning (ABL). It was literally love at first sight. I can remember thinking that book was the best thing that I had ever come across and that it was a perfect fit for who I was and what and how I wanted to teach. I also remember wondering why I had never heard of these activities before, especially in my university classes. I went right back to my grade 8 class and began using them. In June of that year, I received my permanent full-time contract and was placed at an upper socio-economic school with a group of grade sevens that were weak in several areas, especially teamwork. I immediately put ABL into practice. By the end of that school year, I had removed all of the desks in my classroom and replaced them with tables, started an extra-curricular outdoor education club with members who went on hiking and canoe trips, moved some old couches into my classroom, did extensive teamwork and leadership training with my class throughout the year, which led to observable improvements with my students in their self-esteem, teamwork, ability to work with others, motivation, group cohesion, and hardiness.

My use of Adventure Based Learning [ABL] increased throughout the five years that I taught at that school to where we were starting every year with a major three day leadership camp, going on numerous outdoor excursions with the combined outdoor education and leadership club, and incorporating these concepts into our house league system along with numerous gym assemblies that I would run. It was during this time that I bought and read almost every book that Karl Rohnke wrote on the subject of Adventure Based Learning. I also started conducting teacher training sessions at conventions and professional development seminars in the area of ABL activities. I became a bit of an expert in the area of ABL.

At the end of this five year period, my wife and I moved to Iowa so she could do her Masters and for about three months I was at a loss for things to do as I was not allowed to work when we first arrived. After about three weeks of doing nothing, my wife suggested I write the comprehensive book on Adventure Based Learning activities that I had always talked about. So I wrote the book *All Aboard: A book about teamwork and leadership activities*. I finally received permission to work in the USA and got a job as a high school math teacher and track and volleyball coach at one of the local high schools. I also spent my summers out in the eastern United States working as a supervisor with sport camps.

In 2003, my wife finished her Masters and we moved back to Saskatoon where I found myself at a community school. I became focused on inner city and at-risk youth whom I found responded very well within an ABL environment. In 2005, I started work with Gillian Strange on a community school based experiential education program for grade 8 students. The program, Let's Lead – Nīkānētān [LLN], incorporated many approaches, including ABL, as part of its structure. The first five years of our program have been very successful, if success is determined by student attendance, attitude, quality and consistency of completed work, demonstrated learnings and improvements in their social and personal behavior. At about the same time Gillian and I were developing the LLN program, I became very interested in working towards my Masters of Education. All of the reading and research that I was doing for LLN was prodding something within me and I started taking classes in the spring of 2007, around the same time that we received official permission from the Saskatoon Public School Division to initiate our program for the fall of 2007.

My Let's Lead – Nīkānētān Journey

The progressive middle years program that I refer to in this work is the Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program with the Saskatoon Public School Division. The Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program and curriculum is designed to meet the needs of middle year students (grade 7 to 9) who want to learn the curriculum through hands-on, out of school experiences. It is for young people who have shown the potential for leadership and would like to further develop it. They are attracted to the program because they believe that school will be more fun and they have been disengaged from the structures of learning that have been offered to them thus far. This program is geared towards students who have not been able to realize or develop their true potential due to barriers like cost, a sense that school is not aimed at them, a perception that their culture is not valued, or their self concept (supported by general societal stereotypes) does not allow them to have a vision or goals of academic or societal achievement. Therefore, all equipment, transportation and food costs, along with any other fees incurred, are covered completely by the program for each student.

Gillian Strange and I believe that our LLN methodology is designed for all students, regardless of socio- economic standing, and would work quite well for them. In our experience,

many aspects including adventure and project based learning have been successful with students of all ages, all grade levels, and all academic and physical abilities. Those with the highest need for this way of learning are those students who are marginalized, at-risk and generally disengaged from the typical classroom experience. We seek out students for whom poverty limits their participation in activities. They have little to no family support structure which can result in being late to school, absenteeism, parents not at interviews, or no phone. They have high energy levels which can result in poor attention spans, being disruptive, needing attention, needing active learning, and loving to be active. They exhibit attitude and behavior problems as illustrated by being defiant to authority, bored, or disengaged. They can also need help forming positive future goals as they have low self-concept or act as if there is no point to anything. Let's Lead – Nīkānētān focuses on these students because we feel that this type of student has greater needs than others and therefore our program could affect greater societal change. Due to the greater concentration of financial resources that our program receives for staffing and other costs specifically to help these students, the Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program is able to more easily address the needs of students who find themselves marginalized.

Let's Lead – Nīkānētān is about being proactive targeting students whose needs are not met by any other program in the typical school system – students who are teetering on the edge of high-risk lifestyles. They frustrate all attempts to engage them by their classroom teachers and in turn are frustrated at every turn. One of the primary differences between Let's Lead – Nīkānētān and other programs designed for students who are not succeeding in the typical classroom is the manner in which students become part of this program. Students choose to apply and personally accept the invitation to join Let's Lead – Nīkānētān as compared to being forced to attend as so often happens with other programs. We feel very strongly in the power of choice as we have seen the positive and motivating effect it has on everybody who gets to choose. The students who join this program experience empowerment right from the very beginning, even before their first day of school.

My Graduate School Journey

I am like many of our students, which means that I learn best and am motivated best by practical purpose. Having a specialized program in which I was involved and could use to direct

my own professional development was perfect to guide and motivate my learning while taking classes towards my Master's degree. I entered the graduate program with the goal of continuing my work in Adventure Based Learning. I had planned to take the book that I had authored to the next level and to create an undergraduate class completely based on how to teach teamwork and leadership development for K to 12 students. However, by the time I was finished my first class, I had latched onto another concept - that is, project based learning. This idea became the focus of my readings and assignments and I completely incorporated it into our Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program. After a full year of our new program and the success we realized with at-risk students, I began to look for ways that all of my work and research with LLN could somehow become a project or even a thesis. The challenge lay in the fact that there were so many different things that contributed to the success of the program and it seemed unfair to the whole concept to just examine one of them in a research setting.

I was in midst of struggling with this and even looking at the idea of a narrative thesis when I took a class on student engagement taught by Mark Wilderman and Janet McVittie and discovered the concept that I could hang my entire professional hat on. I can still remember the moment when I saw that all of the things that Gillian Strange and I identify as necessities for the Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program matched up perfectly with all of the factors that lead to authentic student engagement. What a eureka moment. I became ravenous in finding articles, books and research on definitions of student engagement and factors that led to it. I was going to do some type of action research involving our students who were clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of all of the components found in the research. I was engaged in the topic of student engagement. I felt that I was finally at the end of my searching journey and now I could get down to brass tacks, as it were.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, my journey of discovery was not over. As I worked on my literature review for this potential action research project, a trend became very clear to me. It was a trend that I had first discovered back when I was deep into reading and learning about Project Based Learning and even way back when I came across Adventure Based Learning. None of this stuff was new. There was over thirty years of research detailing the positive impact on student engagement and effectiveness of implementing all of the components that I had come across. I even had a "Holy Cow" moment when I read John Dewey (1944) and he was talking

about the effectiveness of many of the factors in the early part of the last century.

Dewey (1944) maintained that education creates a disconnect between knowledge and how that knowledge is connected or related to each other and a disconnect between relationships and the experience necessary to understand them. He feels very strongly that without experience, nothing is truly learned or understood. Education seeks to interest the students through things like motivational sets at the beginning of a lesson, which can be almost like a ‘con game’ where the teacher tries to fool the students into wanting to learn. According to Dewey (1944), it’s as if teachers and schools know the curriculum does not contain any potential for real interest on the part of the students and so seek to trick them into being interested. Dewey (1944) goes on to say that the solution to this problem is to allow the students to participate in learning activities and purposes that they find interesting. Dewey (1944) claims that it is necessary for hands-on and mistake ridden contact to occur with any new concepts regardless of the age of the student and he asserts that for an experience to stimulate thinking it must be new enough that the student cannot simply call on previous experience to solve it. Dewey (1944) agreed that knowledge lays the foundation when investigating a problem and is necessary if a solution to that problem is ever going to be found. But too often educators treat this knowledge as the end goal of learning, which leads students to simply act as storage bins of facts and concepts, ready to trot it out whenever asked, but able do little else with it. The teacher, concludes Dewey (1944), should create a situation that allows the learner to experience and think, as well as acting as sort of a co-researcher, sharing the experience with the learner

After a while, I began to realize that there was not much point in doing a research thesis trying to prove something that had already been very clearly talked about and demonstrated over and over again. It felt to me that when you look inside most classrooms across North America, it does not seem like anyone is paying attention anyway. And thus, I became frustrated. In the face of all the research on factors that lead to authentic student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), I started to wonder why teachers were still teaching in a way and a place that someone one hundred years ago would instantly recognize as a classroom. Our schools and classrooms are probably the only thing that a person from the past would be familiar with. Why has schooling not changed? Does the system of education prevent change or do teachers self-impose constraints on themselves? What are the challenges that middle year

teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? It is this last question, particularly related to the perceptions of middle years teachers, which I hope to shed some light on as a result of this study. For the purposes of this study, I will be focusing on middle year teachers in an effort to focus my research and avoid too broad a topic and I am most familiar with middle year students from a professional standpoint.

As mentioned earlier, I am very engaged in the topic of student engagement and in teaching methodology that invites and allows authentic engagement to occur. It is very difficult for me to separate myself from my research. I am asking other middle years teachers about the challenges they perceive because at this point, I am not able to recognize them. The tension that occurred throughout my research was not to discount the challenges that other teachers perceive. My goal is to see if I can help others get around the challenges as I have. I acknowledge the fact that due to my engagement in engagement, my voice is going to be heard no matter what I do. My challenge was to conduct the focus groups, analyze the transcripts and listen to the other teachers` voices without my voice overpowering the others. I can only hope that I have succeeded.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As I mentioned earlier, there is a large body of research and writing in the area of student engagement that dates back to the early part of the twentieth century. This literature has informed and empowered my own teaching and how the Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program is operated. It has directly led to my research question, which is: What are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? I have divided up this review of the literature on engagement into two main sections: defining engagement and conditions that invite and allow engagement.

Defining Engagement

There are lots of different definitions of student engagement or even just engagement, some simple and some complex. It is evident that there has been much interest in this area over the past 20 years as demonstrated by doing an Ovid search on student engagement and getting over 1000 hits. It is very difficult not to bring a personal agenda to most things and the concept of student engagement is no exception. I know that I have my own ideas about what authentic student engagement is and what conditions will invite and allow it to occur. I also know that these ideas could be very different from those held by others. In this section, I will share some of the different ways the word engagement or the phrase student engagement is used and I will clarify my beliefs and the theoretical lens I bring to this work. .

As I have mentioned a few times already, and will again, the definition of what comprises student engagement varies with teachers and researchers. There is a wide range of beliefs and values hidden within how different authors and researchers use the terms engagement or student engagement. At one end of this spectrum is the theory of flow where “flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable” (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003, p. 160). The activity is enjoyable because the person is challenged and desires the challenge. The challenge is relevant to the person experiencing it and he or she has the ability to meet the challenge. The analogy that I use to explain student engagement and flow to people is for them to think of activities that they do where they lose track of time and actually have to be pulled away from the activity by others. Once pulled away, they realize that they have so lost themselves in the activity that several hours could have passed; they are hungry, tired and have to use the washroom. This is flow. This is the highest possible level of authentic

engagement (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006). Is this attainable in school and schoolwork? Should this level of engagement even be a goal of education? I believe that the answer to both questions is yes, but I also understand that creating the conditions that would allow and invite this level of engagement is problematic for many reasons, which will be examined later on.

One of my goals for starting with flow theory is to deliberately create a yardstick against which all other definitions and expectations of engagement can be measured. This helps me cut through all the ambiguity in the different uses and expectations surrounding student engagement. If a teacher is not at least striving towards a situation that will allow and invite flow to take place, then I do not believe that that teacher desires authentic engagement as I define it. I know that I am authentically engaged in the topic of engaging the disengaged. I know this because I am absorbed by the very idea. If someone even opens the door a tiny bit, I am on top of my soapbox proclaiming the kinds of student engagement that I have witnessed teachers allowing and inviting. I know that I was authentically engaged in creating the columns and laying the bricks for the two light posts that I built in front of my house. Thirteen hours had passed before I finally realized that the sun had set, it was too dark for me to see anymore, I was cold, I was hungry, and I needed to use the washroom. That took place last year and I still can't stop strutting as I walk by them because of the pride I have in my accomplishment. Some serious flow took place on that day. That is what I want for students in my classroom.

On the other end of the spectrum stands those who define student engagement as behaving well and being quiet – engagement is when students, in the words of Raphael, Pressley, and Mohan (2008), are “working on tasks associated with valued outcomes” (p. 63) and are “appearing to think and work hard” (p. 63). My questions are: valued outcomes to whom; and since when do we only want our students to ‘appear’ to be thinking and working hard? For these researchers, ‘student engagement’ is primarily seen as a tool to increase student achievement (Barnes & Bramley, 2008; Beuscher, Keuer, Muehlich, & Tyra, 1997). There is no mention by any of these authors that engagement by itself could be a worthwhile goal for the students. Barnes and Bramley (2008) go even further to state that a significant sign of a disengaged student is an increase in talking with other students and ‘blurting out’, which is in complete opposition to collaboration which is one of the most commonly identified factors that research shows can lead to authentic student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Johnson,

2008; Shernoff *et al.*, 2003). The idea that quiet, ‘well-behaved’ learners is a sign of student engagement became problematic for Barnes and Bramley (2008) in their research, as the talking and blurting out increased even more after they implemented some of the engagement strategies with their research group and the students became excited about what they were doing.

Is flow possible within the predominant model of schooling? I believe that it is not. If it does occur, then it usually happens outside of the actual structure of school subjects and curriculum. The first condition of flow is intrinsic interest (Shernoff *et al.*, 2003). For this condition to be met in the classroom, a student’s deep interest must coincide with the subject matter or topic currently being covered. I believe that it is very possible that in any given class, there is at least one student whose interests match the content. This interest could even be intense and intrinsic enough for that student not to be discouraged by the potential monotony of the delivery model (lecture) and be ready to throw themselves fully into whatever happens just for the opportunity to be engaged with the material. Just as that potential begins to manifest itself, the bell rings, class ends and that student makes his/her way to the next class. Meanwhile, what about the other twenty or so students who did not share any intense interest in the concepts or learning? Flow can’t take place here. The student who was intensely interested might find time on his/her own to continue being engaged. The structure of the class might even present an opportunity to work on a project of some kind that allows the student to become absorbed in this area that has so significantly interested them and to create a product that brings with it a feeling of accomplishment and enjoyment. This product promptly gets a grade assigned to it by the teacher that doesn’t end up counting for much in the overall marking scheme of the class. Flow gets crushed here. The prescribed curriculum, the timetable and the grading of a typical high school all work against flow and thus against engagement (Kohn, 1999).

I find it interesting that all of the research that I have found so far and included in this paper discusses the problem of disengaged middle and high school students. I have yet to find a study that identifies engagement as an issue in the primary or pre-school grades. Does this mean that students start out engaged, ready and willing to learn, and that something happens to them as they participate in the school system? What changes as students move through the school system? There is evidence that physiological changes take place and proponents of brain research (Abbott & Ryan, 1999; Feinstein, 2004; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006) point out that

adolescence is such a time of change where typical schooling just does not fit. Other factors that lead to this increase in disengagement include the increased separation of subject areas from each other as students move up through the grades. Things become more abstract and textbook based and more and more loses context and relevance to the student's lives (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006). Cordova and Lepper (1996) express concern about decreasing intrinsic motivation reported in students through the grades. They feel that the primary fault for the decrease is due to the "decontextualization of instruction" (Cordova & Lepper, 1996, p. 715) that has also been identified by Dewey (1944). There is plenty of hearing and reading about things and little hands-on and experiencing. In addition to this, another barrier for authentic engagement is the fact that high content requirements of most courses restrict a teacher's ability to delve deeply into any specific item that may interest the students (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006). Rigid classroom rules and structures crush some students within a couple of years and by grade three a number are already expressing little or no interest in school (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006). For some, disengagement takes longer. Kelm and Connell (2004) indicate that "by high school as many as 0% to 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school" (p. 262). For others, they learn the ropes and do what is minimally needed to get by, because that is all that is really required by the predominant model of education (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006).

Teachers often use lack of student motivation as a convenient excuse to not seek authentic engagement. I have heard teachers indicate that they like students who are self-motivated, but I do not think this is the issue. The research also supports that many 'self-motivated' students are not necessarily authentically engaged in the curriculum, but are instead just doing what they know their teachers want them to do (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; National Research Council, 2004). The drive behind this 'self-motivation' might be the desire for a good mark so they can get into college, which could lead to the job they want. I would even go so far as to say that many of our students do well in our current system of schooling because they are able to fix their eye on the ultimate prize – a job that earns them the lifestyle they desire. Education could be so much more.

Other definitions of student engagement include an emotional or social component (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; National Research Council, 2004). Such definitions indicate that, if nothing else, students might be engaged at school simply because they are socially involved as a

result of their relationships with staff and peers and extracurricular activities. Throughout my career, I have witnessed teachers using this emotional engagement to maintain compliance and create the appearance of engagement by playing the bribe game. I have been guilty of this in the past as I made students' participation on a sports team or in an outdoor education club dependent on their compliance and academic performance in class, specifically classes they were not successful in and/or did not enjoy. This compliance enforcement is even enshrined in many schools' policies on academic performance for athletic eligibility. If the student is not willing to participate in a class or project for its own merits, then changes to it should be made instead of coercing that student into compliance.

So, while I use flow theory as a way of describing engagement, which could be a goal of education and or any human endeavor, I have a more practical definition of student engagement to propose. Student engagement has to do with students actively seeking out and participating in learning for their own specific purposes, and allows for natural ebbs and flows in the drive to learn. It is not normal, nor should it be expected, for someone to be actively engaged in something one hundred percent of the time (and this should be accepted by teachers.) I prefer to use Schlecty's (2002) terms when differentiating between types of engagement, because I believe it helps to frame the conversation and to minimize some of the confusion. Schlecty (2002) refers to student engagement in terms of five levels:

- Authentic engagement: the student is engaged in the work because it is relevant to the student and the outcome is worth it to the student.
- Ritual engagement: the student is just motivated to do the work in order to get a reward or mark; the work and its outcome are for all intents and purposes, meaningless.
- Passive compliance: the student is just doing enough not to get punished.
- Retreatism: the student is pretty much not doing anything including not causing overt problems. This student is just hoping to be ignored.
- Rebellion: the student is completely against the work and wants to do his/her own thing. (p. 1)

Schlecty (2002) also identifies that "any given student will be engaged in different ways in different tasks and sometimes this engagement will differ with regard to the same task" (p. 2).

A student could be going down the road of rebellion because they are unable to do the work (academically weak) or the work is so pointless or boring that the student is frustrated (academically strong). Much of Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn's (1992) work, which is often cited by engagement researchers, coincides with Schlechty's (2002) work on ritual versus authentic engagement. They state that "engagement stands for active involvement, commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy, or lack of interest" (p. 11). They delineate engagement in academic work as the student being engaged in the learning that the academic work is trying to accomplish.

Of course, it only reduces the confusion if we all have a similar frame of reference when discussing the difference between authentic and ritual engagement. In reading and listening to educators talk about engagement, I wonder if most of them are satisfied with and perhaps even desire ritual engagement. The students are participating in the activities of the classroom in so much as it helps them achieve that external motivation like a high grade, a new car from mom and dad, or a place on the basketball team. Would most teachers, if asked, be happy having an entire class of ritually engaged students? This class would follow the rules and do the required work. These students would not misbehave because that would put them into conflict with the desired outcome - a good mark. These students will not challenge the status quo, their teacher, or the curriculum. These students are also highly unlikely to choose more challenging avenues to get the mark (Kohn, 1999). These same students are often criticized for taking the easier path by teachers who try to give choice or autonomy. But this choice should come as a surprise to no one. It seems to be a natural choice when all that is driving us are external motivators. Given two paths to get the same reward (in this case, a mark), very few people would choose the harder path. Teachers of these students would point out that by all observable characteristics, their students appeared to be engaged.

Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) recognize that their definition of student engagement can be problematic because there is no guarantee that the students have any real interest in the learning objectives and might just be going through the motions. They also talk about how difficult it is to measure real engagement because the observable behaviors could simply "represent a student's willingness to comply with school routines, rather than an actual investment in mastering, comprehending, or learning knowledge, skills, and crafts" (Newman,

Wehlage & Lamborn 1992, p. 13). Schlechty (2002) cautions that just because a classroom is well-managed does not mean that it is highly engaged or engaged at all. Fredricks *et al.* (2004) also indicate that engagement is very hard to accurately measure as it is very much an internal or tacit experience. How do you really know someone is engaged or not? It is very possible for someone to be highly engaged and not look it.

This is why I feel that the term student engagement is such a loaded word and one that is used by different people to mean completely different things. When someone talks about student engagement, I have the same questions that Vibert and Shields (2003) have, “What do we mean by engagement? Engagement in what? For what purpose? To what ends?” (p. 226). Both Vibert and Shields (2003) and Zyngier (2008) indicate that our answers to those questions are dependent on the interpretive frame or lens we are looking through. If we are looking through a ‘rational/technical lens’, then the student is the least of our concerns. Engagement is potentially a tool but only in so much as it helps to transmit the unquestioned curriculum as efficiently as possible. If we are looking through a ‘student-centered’ lens, then it becomes all about the students - where “engagement involves productive students working autonomously and effectively on projects of some particular interest to them and over which they have some control” (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 228). Whereas, “A critically transformative or generative pedagogy perceives student engagement as rethinking these experiences and interests increasingly in communal and social terms for the creation of a more just and democratic community and not just for the advancement of the individual” (Zyngier, 2008, p. 1772).

So what kinds of student engagement should we be satisfied with in our schools? Do we want students actively seeking out and participating in learning for their own specific purposes, allowing for natural ebbs and flows in the drive to learn. If we want authentic engagement, as I have defined it, are we prepared for its messy, sometimes noisy, and often difficult to control nature? Are we prepared to allow students to follow their own road maps and end up at their own destinations and not just the ones pre-determined by the curriculum and those people that designed it? If the answer is yes, then we need to look at the conditions that invite and allow authentic student engagement to occur.

Conditions That Invite And Allow Engagement

The saying “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink” is a good representation of how I feel and think about student engagement. The job of a teacher, and the best that an educator can do, is to create the conditions in the classroom and in the school that allow for and invite student engagement. I feel that it is impossible to definitely ‘cause’ authentic engagement.

As a corollary to this belief, I do think that a teacher can actively and quickly cause a student to be disengaged. Not only is disengagement easy to cause, but it is also easier to define and recognize. When a student is withdrawn, not participating or acting out, it is safe to say that he/she is disengaged. Recognizing when a student is authentically engaged is not so easy (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). People show engagement in different ways, so how one student may act when engaged could be different from another.

As mentioned, I feel that a teacher can at best, create the conditions that invite and allow student engagement to occur, not force it to happen. The literature reveals that there are a number of different components that can create a setting that invites and allows engagement: relationships, collaboration and relational learning, adventure based learning and problem based learning.

I found the literature around this issue was very affirming with regards to the work that we are doing in our Let’s Lead – Nīkānētān program and goes a long way to explaining the success of our program. All of the components, including relationships, collaboration and relational learning, adventure based learning and problem based learning can be found in our program and have been identified by our students as being crucial components explaining why they are more engaged this year than in past years. Therefore, I will use examples from LLN to illustrate the approaches discussed in the literature. In the following section, when I use the pronoun ‘we’, I am referring to the staff, including myself, involved in the Let’s Lead – Nīkānētān grade eight and nine program.

Relationships

While I do not want impose a hierarchy on the components that I discuss in this paper, in Let’s Lead - Nīkānētān, we do put a timing precedence on the factor of relationships. People are

more engaged when they respect and value their colleagues' skills and knowledge, and feel that they are respected and valued in return (Davis, 2006; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Marks, 2000; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). People are more engaged when they feel safe, physically and emotionally and cared for (Davis, 2006; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Noddings, 1995; Wentzel, 1997). People are more engaged when they trust that they will be supported in success and failure by those around them. (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). People are more engaged when they are having fun (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). In other words, having strong and healthy relationships in the classroom creates a more engaging environment which then can lead to more effective learning (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Gordon & Crabtree, 2006; Raphael *et al.*, 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Therefore, in Let's Lead – Nīkānētān, we focus on developing the relationships in our classroom before we worry about academics.

It is crucial that we all, students and teachers, like and trust each other for the best learning to take place (Davis, 2006; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Noddings, 1995). This means doing intensive work through activities designed to “break” the ice and barriers for as long as it takes in the beginning of the year and then continuously throughout the year. It also requires that we, as the teachers and adults, strictly govern our responses to students. In other words, we should not act like many of the other adults already in their lives. To create a more engaging environment, we are calm, consistent (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004), caring all of the time (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Wentzel, 1997), fun (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992), and act in a respectful manner towards each of them (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006). We are always striving to be as fair as possible, not just in our eyes but also in our students', as a perception of unfairness can undermine the strong relationship we are developing (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). This perception of unfairness is also one of the reasons why we have sought to even the socio-economic imbalance that many of our students face.

In LLN, we feel so strongly about this that we spend a significant amount of time in the beginning of the year just focusing on relationship building between everyone and continue to focus on it throughout the school year. Most of the students in our program have felt very little connection to their past schools, classmates, and teachers. We feel that this is one of the primary reasons they have previously had poor attendance. The relationships between all of the members of our classroom, including staff and students, lay the foundation for everything that takes place

in our classroom. One of our main focuses is on developing a strong, healthy and happy relationship with each of our students and helping them to do the same with each other. Even our application process requires evidence of a relationship. During any tryout period, the students are not the only ones that are being examined. We ask the students to look carefully at the staff and decide if they can trust, respect and enjoy working with us.

The metaphor that I like to use regarding people's relationship with each other is that of a bank account. To have a healthy bank balance, you need to spend time making deposits. The more you deposit, the better your account is and the more there is available to withdraw. Negative interactions are withdrawals. If you make withdrawals before you deposit anything or make too many withdrawals, your relationship account will be in debt and you will not be experiencing a healthy relationship. This is the situation that many of our students have been experiencing with other classmates and teachers prior to being in our class. We spend as much time as necessary in the beginning creating a healthy relationship account balance before we allow ourselves to make any withdrawals and we guide them toward the same goal with us and with each other. Our focus on relationship building is borne out by the results in our classroom and the research. Davis (2006) indicates that "adolescents benefit, both socially and academically, when they experience supportive relationships with their teachers" (p. 194). She goes on to say that "positive interpersonal relationships and classroom climates are among the most consistent, significant predictors of student motivation and achievement" (Davis, 2006, p. 196).

Collaboration and Relational Learning

The entire structure of Let's Lead – Nīkānētān is based on the principles of collaboration and relational learning. All of our students are broken up into four person learning teams. Every two months, these teams change so that by the end of the school year, the students have been in five different teams with different people from throughout the classroom. They are also assigned to seven person learning teams with completely different people. Teams with a heterogeneous make-up with learners with different learning styles performed better than homogeneous teams or teams that were formed with friends (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005). Most of the activities and projects that our students participate in take place within the context of these teams. Sometimes,

the final products are team created and other times they are individually created, but students are always able to and encouraged to get whatever help they need from their team. The teams also provide an organizational structure very similar to that of a business that has departments or project teams which provides a real-life context, the importance of which is discussed later (Kayes, Kayes & Kolb, 2005).

The learning teams are responsible to and for each other. The students are expected to help, teach and work with each other. This is not to say that our students can't work as individuals but they are always connected to a learning team of at least three other students. Students are more likely to be engaged and motivated when working with others (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Shernoff *et al.*, 2003). We have found that students often learn better from their peers as they respect peer knowledge more than any other. In addition, as they are teaching each other, they are learning themselves and reinforcing current knowledge as they seek to explain what they know (National Research Council (U.S.), 2004). Our students have described how their learning teams help them every day. Brooks, Haley, McCann, Moore and Pearson (2000) found that students' ability to listen, communicate, cooperate, organize, and problem solve improved as a result of consistent use of cooperative groups. Students enjoy working with others (Johnson, 2008, Lightner, Bober & Willi, 2007; National Research Council (U.S.), 2004). As a result of the learning teams, our students have had an opportunity to recognize and appreciate different perspectives and different approaches and strategies to problems (Lightner, Bober & Willi, 2007).

I have one caution and one concern before I leave the topic of collaboration and relational learning. My concern is with the term 'relational learning'. Like so many other terms, it is a loaded term whose meaning is dependent on the user. What one teacher would call relational learning, another might call trivialized group work. For myself, collaboration and relational learning are taking place when the messiness of working with others has an opportunity to come to the forefront and be dealt with as it does in the 'real' world (Kohn, 1992). My caution is that a group of learners needs to be explicitly taught how to effectively work with others before they are asked to use team work to accomplish a task or take on a project. Lack of such instruction can lead to disaster, or at least enough difficulty that everyone, students and teacher, will give up on collaboration (Kohn, 1992). In our program, as part of the relationship development and team

development, we spend a significant amount of time at the beginning of the year and throughout the year working on specific social and group work skills, like communication, to ensure the effectiveness of our collaboration model (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This is discussed in more detail in the next section on Adventure Based Learning.

Adventure Based Learning

Adventure-Based Learning or ABL has been referred to by many different names such as: Adventure Based Counseling or ABC (Daheim, 1998; Graham & Robinson, 2007; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988), Group Adventure Initiative Tasks or GAITS (Kemp & McCarron, 1998), Challenge course or challenge programs (Glass & Benshoff, 2002), Outdoor adventure program (Wolfe & Dattilo, 2006), Adventure education (Moote & Wodarski, 1997), Adventure-based programming (Moote & Wodarski, 1997), Adventure-based experiential learning (Moote & Wodarski, 1997), Adventure activities (Rohnke & Butler, 1995), Project Adventure (Rohnke & Butler, 1995), and Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) (Sheard & Golby, 2006). The name that works the best for me is Adventure-Based Learning or ABL, which was defined by Cosgriff (2000) as “the deliberate use of sequenced adventure activities - particularly games, trust activities and problem solving initiatives – for the personal and social development of participants” (p. 90). I like ABL for two reasons; it contains the words adventure and learning which is what it is all about and it closely mirrors another of my preferred teaching methodologies, that of Project-Based Learning or PBL, in the way it sounds and in its constructivist theoretical framework.

ABL is a series of activities that involve some type of challenge and risk that will require the use of problem solving skills by a group of individuals that often takes place in the outdoors (Autry, 2001; Conley, Caldarella, & Young, 2007; Daheim, 1998; Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Forgan & Jones, 2002). The outdoor environment is also considered by many to be an important part of the definition of ABL (Glass & Benshoff, 2002; Graham & Robinson, 2007; Sheard & Golby, 2006; Wolfe & Dattilo, 2006). While this is a founding principle of ABL, one shouldn't feel restricted by it. Many of the activities of ABL can be done indoors and some of them are even better suited to an indoor setting. Adventure based learning is all about being active and hands-on (Priest & Gass, 1997; Rohnke & Butler, 1995, Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe,

1988) and the more active and hands-on an activity, the greater the positive effect on student engagement (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; National Research Council (U.S.), 2004). ABL is also about having fun and enjoying the activities while still learning, which researchers have found necessary to “sustain engagement” (Newman, *et al.*, 1992, p. 27). Examples of ABL include camping, canoe trips, wall-climbing, initiative and teamwork tasks, low ropes challenge courses, trust activities, swimming and preparing meals.

ABL has been found to improve participant’s ability to trust others and themselves as well as their own feelings of trustworthiness (Autry, 2001). Autry (2001) and Gillis (1996) showed that ABL increased students’ sense of empowerment, which Autry (2001) defined as the “perceived feeling of control in one’s life and is a contributing element to self-determination” (p. 298). A number of studies have shown significant improvement in participant’s self esteem and perception of self (Brand, 2001; Cason, 1994; Gillis, 1996; Graham & Robinson, 2007; Kemp, 1998; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). It has been shown that ABL increases life effectiveness skills including time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, task leadership and emotional control (McLeod & Allen-Craig, 2007). Teamwork and the ability to work well with others improves through ABL along with an increased recognition of gained personal values (Autry, 2001). Other results include improvements to motivation and behavior (Brand, 2001; Forgan & Jones, 2002; Gillis, 1996). There is an increased feeling of involvement with the group or class (Conley, Caldarella & Young, 2007) combined with improvements in group cohesion (Glass & Benschhoff, 2002). Students experienced an increase in their overall hardiness which is defined as the ability to turn adversity into a learning experience (Sheard & Golby, 2006). Daheim (1998) states that

Students reported developing a stronger interest in being attentive and interested in classroom activities, participating in discussions, and doing additional work on their own. Additionally, they indicated increases in the level of the friendship they feel for each other as expressed by getting to know each other, helping each other work with homework, and enjoying working together (p. 66).

All of these findings are connected to the improvement of student engagement. ABL has been shown to have a positive effect on teamwork, involvement with a group, and group cohesion which are all factors in successful collaboration which leads to increase student

engagement (Autry, 2001; Glass & Benshoff, 2002). ABL also represents authentic work as students work together to overcome challenges and solve problems that are based on, and often in, the real world. Authentic work has been found to have a positive effect on student motivation and engagement (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Marks, 2000; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). The term authentic work is another loaded word that can have several different interpretations. Based on the literature, I think that authentic work is work that is challenging, is connected to the real world in some fashion, involves discussion, is interesting, fun and allows students to own the work (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Marks, 2000; Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992). One of the foundational principles of ABL is that the participants get to choose how much they will be involved and how much they will risk (Priest & Gass, 1997; Rohnke & Butler, 1995; Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988). Choice and autonomy are present throughout all of the activities as groups seek to solve the challenges in their own way. Increasing students' autonomy and the ability to make choices about what to do throughout the learning process increases their engagement and motivation towards the activities (Barnes & Bramley, 2008; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Shernoff *et al.*, 2003; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). For all of these reasons, it comes as no surprise to me when I run into former students and they tell me that their most enjoyable and engaged moments of their schooling experience was doing ABL activities in my classroom.

Project Based Learning

The pedagogy of Project Based Learning is very similar to Adventure Based Learning in that student autonomy and collaboration is paramount (Helle, Rynjhalala & Olkinuora, 2006; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 1997; Thomas, 2000). Project Based Learning (PBL) is exactly as it sounds. The students learn by working on projects. Different authors and researchers have different ideas about what components are essential for PBL to take place but there are at least three areas where PBL theorists agree (Helle, Rynjhalala & Olkinuora, 2006; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 1997; Thomas, 2000). The first of these is having a driving question or problem. According to Marx, *et al.* (1997), the driving question is what literally drives the project. This idea of a driving question has its roots with Dewey (1944) and his assertion that a real problem is situated within the student's own world and in fact comes

from the student, whereas the pretend problem comes from the teacher or the curriculum which also determines what is considered a right answer or solution. As Marx, *et al.* (1997) indicate that the driving question should be connected to the required curriculum and to real-life issues or problems and be possible to address through work done by the students. Thomas (2000) states that “PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that “drive” students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts of a discipline” (p. 3). Helle, *et al.* (2006) points out that since most of us are going to be experiencing problems and questions in our real lives after our education is over, we are going to have to realize that it makes sense that we learn how to tackle problem solving at school and learn how to do it with relevant problems. This idea, of a driving question or problem, is much more than simply the problem solving that often takes place in subjects like math. It has to encompass enough complexity that it will motivate and engage the student to spend a sufficient amount of time trying to answer it. As indicated earlier, the more meaningful the context and relevant the work and activities are to the students lives, the greater the level of engagement and motivation (Barnes & Bramley, 2008; Cordova & Lepper, 1996; National Research Council (U.S.), 2004).

Another component that most authors agree on is the idea of student-directed learning or investigation. Instead of the more traditional teacher led approach, PBL involves the students in the real-life process of decision making, planning, data collection, observing and researching that must take place if a solution to the problem or question is going to be found (Marx, *et al.*, 1997). According to Thomas (2000), for a project to be considered PBL, it needs to be primarily student-led - which means “a good deal more student autonomy, choice, unsupervised work time, and responsibility” (p. 4). This means that the students need to figure out what they know already and what they need to know, as well as how they are going to learn what they need to learn. There is no right or single way to get to the answer, just like there is probably no definitive correct answer. (Helle, *et al.* 2006). PBL takes time, just like solving problems in the real world does, which is another facet of PBL that connects it to improving student engagement (Newman *et al.*, 1992). As it is student directed, it is also student individualized. What one student may need to know, another may already know. What one student may decide to do when trying to figure out a solution could be completely different from other students. Student autonomy leads to greater engagement (Barnes & Bramley, 2008; Shernoff *et al.*, 2003). Patall,

et al. (2008) found in a meta-analysis of 41 studies regarding the effect of choice that “choice can have a positive overall effect on intrinsic motivation, as well as on a number of related outcomes including effort, task performance, perceived competence, and preference for challenge” (p. 294).

The third common component is the creation of a final artifact or product. It is the proof that the process occurred at all. The product gives an overall purpose to the project. The possibilities for products are endless and can be represented in many different ways: from the actual construction of a structure or model to a presentation to a group. The creation of an artifact allows the students to share their learning and knowledge with other students, parents, and community members (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). It also allows the student to experience the real-life process of review and revision. So many assignments in school are given back to students who toss the assignment in the garbage after looking at their mark (possibly their only motivation for doing the assignment). Often little or no time is spent reviewing and learning from their mistakes. In PBL, the sharing and reviewing of the products can allow for feedback, revision, and representation with the idea of creating the best possible product within certain timelines, just like in the real world. Helle, *et al.* (2006) point out that the artifact acts as a concrete end point to PBL. Unlike other inquiry-based learning methods, where possible solutions can be presented and tested almost endlessly, project-based learning has a definite endpoint. This creation of artifacts or products also acts to keep students and teachers on task. Thomas (2000) feels that it is the products, who the products are for, and how the products are evaluated that connect PBL to the real world which has a positive effect on student engagement (Newman *et al.*, 1992). Barnes and Bramley (2008) found that “students looked forward to class days during which they were allowed to work on a real world project” (p. 87). People in the real world are constantly creating things for a specific purpose and for a specific audience whether it is the plans for a building or the building itself, the script for a movie or the movie itself or even this paper that I am writing right now.

Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) and Marx *et al.* (1997) indicate that another important component of PBL is collaboration. The other authors don't mention collaboration specifically as a necessary part although they often have terms like “project groups” in their articles which seem to indicate the students are working together. Krajcik and Blumenfeld

(2006) point out that in PBL, students work with each other, their teacher and with members of the community to plan, research, bounce ideas around and use as sources of information. Another benefit of collaboration is the opportunity to give feedback to and get feedback from other students. While Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) point out that collaboration is good for the success of PBL and student learning, they don't touch on collaboration as a real-life skill in its own right or its positive effect on student engagement (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Lightner *et al.*, 2007; Shernoff *et al.*, 2003). Johnson (2008) indicates that "strong empirical support was found for the proposition that schools placing greater emphasis on relational learning are better able to serve the motivational needs of adolescent students" (p. 80). The ever-increasing globalization of our world and our workforce also increases our need for the ability to collaborate with others in our immediate community and in other countries. Our constantly improving technology has made this kind of working together possible. When looking for solutions to a problem, people can seek help from almost anybody in the world (Hemenway, 2000). There are very few people in today's world who work alone. So while PBL is teaching our students how to solve problems and create real world projects, it is also teaching them how to effectively work with others.

My Research Question

So now what? Reading of the literature helped me realize that the topic of student engagement actually framed the conversation that I had been having about my project and then thesis for the past two years. Armed with my new banner and hopefully standing upon my final soapbox, I decided that I would do a research into the conditions that invite and allow student engagement to take place in the school and in the classroom. However, through my reading of the research around this topic I came to the realization that there was a plethora of studies that effectively demonstrated what these conditions were. In essence, it became my 'duh' moment in developing my research questions. If it is clear and obvious to me and to all the people involved in these studies what the appropriate conditions are that lead to authentic student engagement, why is it, generally, not happening? What are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? My metaphor of schooling is that of a rocket that has so much potential but it has not gone anywhere. We have spent so much money and time on this rocket and have so many hopes and dreams tied up into it and where it might take us

and yet it is still sitting on the ground. Why? What are the ‘clamps’ on this rocket that are preventing it from launching and shooting for the stars? I see schooling as a “Failure to Launch”. My goal now is to reveal these ‘clamps’ so that hopefully, they can be removed. In other words, the goal of my research is to examine what are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies?

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

There is much research that I draw from as a result of my emphasis on learning by doing, experiential education (Cosgriff, 2000; Daheim, 1998), relevant experiences (McKenzie, 2000), connecting learning to different contexts (Autry, 2001; McKenzie, 2000), problem solving (Cosgriff, 2000), building individual sets of knowledge and reality (Dickson & Gray, 2006; McKenzie, 2000). I do not believe that there are unchangeable “truths” that teachers must teach. I hold more to the pragmatist view that truth is what individuals make it and it is constantly changing which makes the teaching of ‘just facts’ meaningless (Armstrong, 2002). This of course has had an impact on my research question and methodology as I seek to examine teachers’ perceptions because the truth of what challenges exist lies with the teachers who perceive those challenges. It was interesting to see what ideas came out of groups of teachers as compared to just one teacher. My use of focus groups as my primary data collection method also connects to my belief in post-modernism or constructivism which is present in all of my teaching and philosophy. Abbott (1999) defines constructivist learning as “an intensely subjective, personal process and structure that each person constantly and actively modifies in light of new experiences” (p. 67). Based on this definition, I am most definitely constructivist in my thinking as the students in the Let’s Lead – Nīkānētān program are not passive receivers of information but instead very active in the process of learning and creating meaning that is relevant to them as they move through the school year (Armstrong, 2002). That which engages the students also engages the teachers. The two learning methods that we use in the Let’s Lead – Nīkānētān program, project and adventure based learning, both stem from this belief that knowledge is created in the minds of the learner, not as permanent truths just waiting to be discovered. In the focus groups, the teachers involved will have the opportunity to discuss and decide what barriers exist and possible solutions to those identified barriers.

Looking at the students that we work with in LLN, one might label us as behaviourists. Autry (2001) and Graham and Robinson (2007) are two of the researchers who talk about this being a primary goal of ABL with at-risk youth and their behaviours. They identify behaviour and attitude change as a desired outcome and so do we. The difference between our program with ABL and traditional behaviour theory is how we go about accomplishing this goal.

Traditional behaviourists view learning through the lens of positive and negative conditioning. If students do something desired by the teacher, they are rewarded and if they do something not desired by the teacher, they are punished (Armstrong, 2002). We are constructivist and progressive in our approach which includes ABL activities and theory. There are real-life consequences to every decision we make and we need to learn how to understand and examine those consequences, preferably prior to making a decision, so that we can decide if they are worth the decision. We have an expectation in LLN that everyone must be prepared to accept the consequences (good and bad), deal with them, learn from them and move on. Our students' behaviour changes because they learn how to make decisions and are empowered to make decisions as to what is best for them and what they want.

While there are definite elements of these educational theories throughout my teaching philosophy and therefore in my research topic and methodology, the one theory that I wholeheartedly subscribe to in all its tenets is progressivism as it relates to education. I identify with John Dewey and his view on progressive education including his emphasis on personal experience and interest, hands-on learning that is related to the real world and the students' lives, and problem based learning where the problem needs to be new enough that it is challenging to the student and not easily solved but it cannot be so difficult or removed from previous experience and knowledge that the student is overwhelmed or has no basis with which to begin formulating a response (Armstrong, 2003; Dewey, 1944; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). My research methodology choice of teacher focus groups with its emphasis on discussion and problem solving came directly from my progressive beliefs. I was not looking for confirmation of my ideas. I was looking for whatever the teachers have to offer. I looked forward to the messiness of the focus groups. One-on-one interviews or surveys are neater and easier and way more prescriptive and controlling. I already knew what I believed. What I wanted to find out was what other teachers believed and perceived.

Research Methodology

My research question is "What are the challenges that middle year's teachers perceive that prevent them from implementing proven effective engagement strategies?" Focus groups offered an opportunity for teachers to be involved in the process and not be just passive people

taking a survey or answering some questions, so I felt and still feel that focus groups was the best fit for my research. My research question is about teachers' perceptions of challenges to implementing the student engagement strategies that were discussed in chapter two. Because the focus is on teachers' perceptions, I need to have my attention on the teachers. I am focusing on what teachers perceive as the challenges because I feel that the single most important factor that dictates what occurs in any single classroom is the teacher in that classroom. As Gordon and Crabtree (2006) put it, "the teacher remains the prism through which all other decisions about the educational process are filtered" (p. 116). Therefore, it is that teacher's perceptions that become fact, regardless of what the facts might actually be. What teachers perceive will guide their practice. Every single classroom is different because every single teacher is different. When looking at and trying to implement educational reform or change, school boards and administrators have to look first at the teachers and what they believe.

I decided to use focus groups as the vehicle for getting at these perceptions for a number of reasons:

- A) I could not conceive of any survey question that will allow the depth of inquiry that I desired into teachers' perceptions.
- B) After participating in many lively and in-depth discussions with colleagues in my masters classes, I feel that the richness of the responses only took place because of the synergy those discussion created as compared to a one-on-one interview. Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) indicate the advantages of focus groups over individual interviews include:
 1. *synergism* (when a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction),
 2. *snowballing* (when the statements for one respondent initiate a chain reaction of additional comments),
 3. *stimulation* (when the group discussion generates excitement about a topic),
 4. *security* (when the group provides a comfort and encourages candid responses), and
 5. *spontaneity* (because participants are not required to answer every question, their responses are more spontaneous and genuine). (pg. 14)

Litoselliti (2003) and Morgan (1997) also agree that there is greater depth of data collected as a result of the interaction that takes place in a focus group as compared to individual interviews or surveys.

- C) I wanted as much input from as many teachers as possible. I wanted depth but I also wanted breadth. I did not feel that one on one interviews or surveys would get the depth I was looking for. Morgan (1997) and Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) specifically identify this as an advantage of focus groups. I wanted my data to be as representative as possible so I felt that focus groups presented me with the best approach.
- D) In addition to trying to get at teachers' perceptions about the challenges, I wanted to work towards some possible solutions or ways to help teachers overcome these perceived challenges that could be implanted on a system wide scale. Having interested and motivated teachers together in a group was the best way to start planning for change which is supported by both Litoselliti (2003) and Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996).

Participants

Two focus groups were conducted for this study. The first focus group had seven teachers and the second focus group had three teachers participate. The second focus group was to have more but last minute scheduling conflicts resulted in a few of the teachers being unable to make it. Initially, I was a little concerned when I had only three people show up for the second focus group but those concerns were dissipated as a result of the richness of the conversation that occurred. I decided not to arrange for a third focus group as a result of the repetition of the data that occurred in the two focus groups. Everyone was already saying similar things so I felt that a third focus group was not necessary for my research at this time. I did not set out to come up with some absolute truths. I wanted a snapshot in time regarding the challenges that a group of teachers perceive that exist in their use of engagement strategies and I got that in spades.

I began recruiting participants in January 2010. I had originally planned on recruiting from all three of the main school divisions in the area but decided to recruit first from the local public division and only go to the other school divisions if I did not get enough participants. The advantage to focusing on one division's teachers is that it becomes possible for my research to have specific division applications as well. Upon receiving permission from the local public division, the recruitment took place in the form of a letter (Appendix A) that was sent to all middle years teachers in the local public division explaining the study and asking if they would

be interested in participating in a focus group that examined the issues. Interested teachers replied by mail and email and the two focus groups were organized. Any teacher who replied that he or she was willing to be part of the focus groups was invited to participate. All of the teachers were teachers in the local public division. Three of the participants were in their twenties and had less than three years of teaching experience. The other seven participants were in their forties and had between fifteen and twenty years of teaching experience. One of participants was an administrator as well as a teacher. All of the teachers were teachers in regular middle years classrooms. Regular classrooms meaning that they were not alternative programs with an experiential mandate nor did they have additional staff and funding. There were four male teachers and six female teachers in total with two of them being grade nine teachers in a high school and the other eight being grade seven and eight teachers from elementary schools.

Procedure

Both focus groups took place in a conference room at the Ramada Hotel on Idylwyld Drive in Saskatoon. The change in location occurred due to booking conflicts at the original planned site. A cold supper was provided to the participants to make it easier for them to be able to participate. No other remuneration or gifts were given to the participants. I used a computer to digitally audio record the sessions. I had originally planned on videotaping the focus groups as I thought that it would be easier to transcribe. I decided that it would be more efficient to use a professional stenographer and she indicated that it was more effective for her to have an digital audio recording only. I did not need the video tape for any other purpose than transcription so I changed the recording format. The consent forms (Appendix B) had been sent out to the participants along with the focus group questions prior to the focus group session so that the participants would have an opportunity to read over and think about their responses. It was not my desire to surprise anybody. I wanted to give them as much an opportunity for thoughtful responses as possible.

When they arrived at the location, I had additional copies of the consent form for them all to read over and sign if they had not had the opportunity yet. The participants were told that did not have to answer any question that they did not want to and could pull out of the study at any

time. They were also told that their names would never be used but that they too had a responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of the responses as members of the focus groups. I also asked them to be aware of the professional nature of the discussion and that there was no right answer. I informed them that my role was to facilitate the discussion and at times I might prod for more detail but I would not be giving my opinion or thoughts on any of the questions or their responses. We then proceeded with the first question. The questions were as follows:

1. What do students who are authentically engaged look like to you?
2. What do you think of when you hear the term authentic engagement used?
3. Describe an educational experience where you saw authentically engaged students.
4. What do you feel invited and allowed for the students to be authentically engaged?
5. What are the challenges that teachers face in inviting and allowing authentic engagement?
6. How can we overcome these challenges?

After the last question was discussed, I asked each person to give some closing thoughts or comments and then stopped the audio recording. I thanked everyone for coming and their assistance in my research and said goodbye. Both focus groups lasted for approximately two hours and everyone seemed to enjoy and benefit from the collegial opportunity. In fact, a couple of them expressly stated that they wished they could be part of something like this more often as they were taking away some good ideas to try out with their own students.

After both focus groups were completed, I passed both audio recordings to a professional stenographer to be transcribed. Both focus groups took about two hours and resulted in over fifty pages of typed data. I did not feel that I missed anything in not transcribing the data myself. After I received the transcript, I sent a copy to each of the participants and invited them to make any additions, deletions or changes to their responses. All of the participants responded that they were satisfied that the transcript accurately portrayed their answers.

Dealing With The Data

My research question asks: What are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? I asked this question because I feel very strongly about the importance of authentic student engagement and which strategies are most effective for inviting and allowing this engagement. I had my own hypotheses about what teachers may perceive as challenges but I did not want my feelings and thoughts to overly influence the research. I was very aware of the strength of my convictions and my propensity to get on my soapbox and expound these convictions to anyone nearby. As I was aware of this, I was very careful to follow the qualitative method of Grounded Theory as outlined by Magnotto (1996) and Smith and Pohland (1969) with regards to allowing the data gathered to create the theory.

I set up the data collection methodology very carefully and mediated the groups with this in mind. This was another reason why I felt that focus groups were the best vehicle for collecting the data. In an individual interview, the only person the interviewee would have been interacting with and looking at would have been me. I would have been constantly in focus and so any verbal and non-verbal response that I gave could have potentially affected the data. When mediated properly, the focus group spends the majority of its time interacting with each other and this would diminish any effect that I could have on the responses. I wanted to get at what teachers perceive as the barriers and ground my theory development in what the teachers say in the focus groups. I allowed the discussion to go where it did and allowed the data to speak for itself (Magnotto, 1996).

As I was preparing to analyze the data, I searched for some examples of other focus group data analysis to guide me in my own. I found an excellent resource in Tamara Colton's 2008 Master's Thesis on Women's perceptions of quality of household work and through Tamara's thesis, I found Braun and Clarke (2006). Using both of these sources, I came to realize that I was not really using Grounded Theory in the sense that I was after some overall theory that could be used to make decisions with. I was using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I was interested in seeing if there were some common themes in the data that I had gathered and if there were, could something be done about them.

As pointed out by Braun and Clark (2006), I know that my decisions as to what information and themes to pull from the data ultimately influence, if not directly decide, what

data and conclusions my thesis will result in. Prior to reading the data, I had loosely decided that the number of people who brought up the same thing would govern the strength of a theme. Once I had read the data a few times and made my initial jot notes, it became evident that a focus group had to be analyzed differently than a set of individual interviews. In observing the focus groups and then reading through the transcripts, it seemed that if someone brought up something and explained it in detail, then others in the group would feel that it had been discussed sufficiently and would bring something else up. This meant that very few of the ideas were repeated except between different focus groups. This meant that I had to change my decision making process on what would constitute a theme. I decided that if something was repeated by more than one person, particularly if it was repeated across the two different focus groups, it would potentially be a theme. If a participant felt very strongly about an idea, explained it in great detail or explained how it was central to his/her teaching beliefs, it would potentially be a theme. The third and final potential determinant was if the idea that was brought up by a participant was something that I had found to be common in the literature that I had read. I felt that these rules had the rigidity and flexibility that I needed to be able to analyze my data and offer an interpretation of what the teachers were saying. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Once I had the transcripts in hand, I began reading through them over and over again. On each pass, I would make jot notes in the margin about key phrases or words that were used that would summarize the main point the speaker was making. It is important at this point to identify that I was after as complete a reflection of how the ten participants in my two focus groups felt about the challenges facing them in engaging middle years students. For this reason, I did not focus on just one aspect of the data, but instead, presented all of it. I recognized that this meant that I might not address something as sufficiently as I might if I had chosen to focus on just one part. (Braun & Clarke, 2006) After I had felt that I had read through the data enough times to pull out every main thought possible, I gathered all of the phrases and words into one document under each main section (Appendix C). I focused on using a semantic approach to analyze my data where I did not look for any hidden meaning behind the words that were spoken by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I took the participants and their words at face value. From this set of codes, I sorted them into different sets of themes until I had settled on the ones that made the most sense to me and my interpretation of the data (Appendix D). From this set of

themes, I began my discussion of my interpretation of what the ten middle years teachers talked about in my two focus groups.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA & DISCUSSION

Results

My research question is: What are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? There were a total of ten participants in the two focus groups (pseudonyms are: Mary, Sue, Lisa, Tracy, Jane, Ruth, Tom, Steve, Eric, and Mitch) with six females and four males. To warm up my focus group, as suggested by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996), and to come at my broader question with a deeper understanding of the views of participants, I started out by asking the groups several sub-questions related to student engagement. With the transcripts in hand, I began the analysis process and found that responses to the sub-questions combined with responses to my main research question provided data from which some interesting themes began to emerge. The data fell under four main sections:

- What does authentic student engagement look like?
- Factors that invited and allowed observed authentic student engagement.
- Challenges to engaging middle years students
- What can be done about the challenges?

What does authentic engagement look like?

As I stated in the methodology chapter, my goal was to determine teachers' perceptions about these topics and to be aware of and careful about my own opinions which is why this first question was so important. The term authentic engagement is a loaded one and like so many others, its meaning is in the eye of the beholder. I know what I mean when I use it but I needed to know what the teachers in my focus group meant because it shaped the direction of the focus group conversation. The teachers in the two focus groups identified six indicators of authentic engagement: paying attention, physical involvement, caught up, fun, student voices, and present and awake.

Paying Attention

One of the first indicators of engagement that was identified by the participants was that the students look like they are paying attention which, interestingly enough, is also the only identified indicator that pre-supposes that the students are to be engaged in listening to a speaker

as in a teacher giving a lecture. Eyes on speaker, listening well and asking good questions were all considered hallmarks of paying attention. As Mary said, “So for me authentically engaged students look like kids that are paying attention, who are listening well and who are asking good questions, who don’t ask just the yes no type of questions.” Steve indicated that it was, “Not distracted, have eye contact. They are focused in on their assignment, project, or whatever they are supposed to be doing.” This was not a major theme as only three teachers made reference to it but I included it because I felt that it was important to address the idea of paying attention as the only indicator of authentic engagement.

While none of the teachers in the focus groups proclaimed that paying attention or looking like they are paying attention is the primary descriptor of authentic engagement, there are a few authors that I discussed in chapter two who would, based on their descriptions of their research criteria. Raphael, Pressley and Mohan (2008) identify their criteria for engagement as “not only did students have to be working on tasks associated with valued outcomes (e.g., reading, writing), they had to be working on something that required thoughtfulness, appearing to think and work hard as they carried out the task (i.e., thinking before acting, often requiring several attempts before making certain progress, sometimes needing teacher or peer assistance)” (p. 63). Kadakia (2005) indicated in her study on improving student engagement, “students’ body language implied that they were actively paying attention” (p. 32).

There are many others who would point out that students looking like they are paying attention does not mean that they are authentically engaged (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Newman *et al.*, 1992; Schlechty, 2002). They could be ritually engaged or even just passively compliant (Schlechty, 2002) so as to not get into trouble and engage just enough to get the mark they want. Paying attention also presupposes that students who don’t look like that, are not. Just because a student is fidgeting, doodling, or looking away does not mean that he/she is not authentically engaged. I feel that one has to be very careful in describing someone who is paying attention as authentically engaged as it pre-disposes a teacher towards that percentage of students who can actually pull it off versus those that cannot.

Physical Involvement

Some teacher participants indicated that they thought that when students were actively involved in doing something, particularly when it required physical activity, they were thought to be authentically engaged. While not impossible, it is more difficult to fake engagement when whatever a person is involved in requires him/her to be actually doing something as compared to just listening to something. Jane described, “Kids were exploding pop all over the hallway and you know floating marbles and doing all sorts of things, sawing things off on a saw horse in the middle of the hallway and creating lots of mess and lots of noise and they were having the times of their lives.” It also makes it potentially easier to identify those that are not engaged. As Tracy explained, “We had a yoga project in my class... We were doing our thing out there... I don’t know how you cannot be, perform that and be authentically engaged. Otherwise you are going to hurt yourself. You have to be present.” Newman *et al.* (1992) use the term “active involvement” (p. 11) when defining student engagement.

This was a minor theme as only two teachers made direct reference to it, but I have included it as a theme in what engaged students look like, because as indicated below, it emerges as a major theme in the factors that led to authentic engagement. Another way to describe physical involvement would be experiential education, for which there is a lot of research documenting that a student who is doing is far more likely to be engaged (Daheim, 1998).

Caught Up

Three of the teachers described students as engaged when they become so caught up that the norms of school do not apply. They become so engaged that schedules and break times are ignored. Tom described it as, “They are choosing to go through the break because they are so stoked about what they are learning about.” They become so emotionally involved and excited that they speak over top of each other. Eric indicated, “So I kind of like it sometimes when my class isn’t raising their hands and waiting to say something, because when they are shouting things out they are really thinking about what is happening in the moment.” Being caught up was identified by three of the teachers. This description of authentically engaged students corresponds directly with Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow (Shernoff et al, 2003). To be caught

up in the moment is what Csikszentmihalyi is talking about when he talks about “deep absorption” (Shernoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 160).

Fun

Students having fun and enjoying themselves were described as being engaged. It was only mentioned by two of the teachers, one in each focus group. I feel it necessary to include it here because for Tracy, it was a crucial piece to her definition of student engagement. She asserted that, “Now, for me, like, if we are not having fun, so I guess joy might be part of performing, because if you’re not having fun you may as well go home.” Steve brought it up because he asked his students and they identified it as an indicator that students are authentically engaged. They told him that they were engaged, “If you see a lot of kids smiling during the activities, having fun, enjoying themselves.”

The idea that fun can lead to engagement is supported by Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) who observe, “Fun reduces the distress of intense pressure to succeed and the boredom of unchallenging but perhaps necessary, routines” (p. 28).

Present and Awake

I called this set of codes things we take for granted because being at school, awake, sitting up and not turned away as showing engagement was only mentioned by a couple of teachers but it brought up an interesting contrast. It is not just about authentically engaged students but it is also about authentically dis-engaged students. While being present and awake may not seem like deep authentic engagement, student who are present and awake are certainly more engaged than those students who are absent. It would be safe to say that students who are not present, are most likely dis-engaged. Tracy started with, “The first word I thought of was awake and sitting up and paying attention, asking questions.” In light of all the things that may be going on in their personal lives, being at school and awake may be as engaged as they are able to be. As Jane identified, “Authentically engaged might look like, oh, you’re in school today, as compared to 3 other days last week.” This idea will be examined more deeply when I explore the challenges to engagement identified by the participants in the focus groups.

Student Voices

This theme emerged from all of the participants which is why I consider it the major theme of what student engagement looks like or in this case, sounds like. It sounds like students. Not one teacher said that it sounds like teachers. All participants agreed that students asking questions, talking about the topic outside of class, wanting more information, shouting out questions and answers, are students who are authentically engaged. Mary declared, “And when student leaders rise up and create more questions and create more discussion. That is a good sound.” There is a lot of literature support for the notion that the sound of student voices is a big indicator of high student engagement.

As Ruth noted, “But it was loud, it was chaotic, kids were on the floor, kids were on the desks, kids were in groups, I had kids on my computer, their computer, like everywhere. They were engaged in what they were doing.” The idea of student voice and student power have been identified by McMahon and Portelli (2004) and Munns (2007) as important to authentic student engagement, particularly with marginalized youth. Munns (2004) goes further in describing a lack of student voices and predominance of teacher voices being a disengaging message for students.

Everyone engages differently

Something that a few teachers brought up and others expressed agreement with is that in the end, there is no absolute measure for what authentic engagement looks like as different people act differently from each other. Where one student may be loud and outspoken, another may be quiet and reflective and yet both could be equally engaged. It is the teacher who needs to get to know his or her students so as to recognize when a student is engaged or not and respond accordingly. Tom pointed this out, “So for me I try to give them lots of different options, so it is not tailored specifically to what I think it should be. So for me that is what engagement is.” Schlechty (2002) referred to this when he stated, “any given student will be engaged in different ways in different tasks, and sometimes this engagement will differ with regard to the same task” (p. 2). As Lisa said:

“I think it can look very different depending on who your kids are. You know some could be totally engaged sitting in the corner with their headphones on sitting and writing or

sitting and drawing, or sitting and doing whatever. While some, the idea of sitting and writing, they hate, but sitting and talking and chatting with a teacher, or another student or with a couple more students, they might be totally engaged.”

Summary

I had asked this warm-up question to set the frame of reference regarding what kind of engagement we were talking about. The teachers in the two focus groups identified six indicators of authentic engagement: paying attention, physical involvement, caught up, fun, student voices, and present and awake. At no time did the participants state that all six indicators needed to be present for authentic engagement to exist nor did they indicate that the indicators existed separately from each other.

Factors That Led To Authentic Student Engagement

After discussing what the focus group participants felt defined authentic engagement, we then examined educational experiences which they have seen lead to the student behaviors they described as being engaged. From the experiences they shared, I asked the teachers to identify what it was about the experiences that they felt led to the student engagement that they saw. The participants identified six factors that they felt led to the authentic student engagement: student competence, being outside of the school, passionate and knowledgeable teachers, autonomy, relevance, and experiential education.

Student Competence

Only two teachers identified wanting to contribute and wanting to be an expert as factors which makes competence a minor theme in terms of my research. The two teachers (one in each group) indicated that competence was the main factor in the activity that they were describing. Tracey shared:

And in all honesty, the thing that resonates with me is that kids want to be experts. They want to feel that they have something valuable to contribute to another group of people

and so whether it is something very small, or whether it is something huge that they can teach somebody else, that to me is what a kid looks for everyday.

In both cases, the teachers talked about the huge positive impact on engagement that they observed in their students who were not otherwise doing very well as a result of the opportunity to be the experts and the other students wanting and needing their help. Tom described what happened as so:

They were engaged because they were teaching other students how to use this software, they were writing, and they were following each other. They were you know, commenting back and forth with insightful things, because I think they got a little empowerment because they sit at the back of the class, and they try to fade into the wall and now they know something, they are the professionals, they are the experts, they can come and teach thing and make things way better.

Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) state that “when efforts to act competently are met with success, this generates continued investment, and the cycle continues. The need for competence has been recognized as one of the most powerful bases for human action and motivation” (p. 19). They identify that while there are many activities that schools do that provide opportunities for expressing competence, there are many others that are ignored or diminished. The National Research Council (2004) agrees:

Students will not exert effort in academic work if they are convinced they lack the capacity to succeed or have no control over outcomes. They need to know what it takes to succeed and to believe they can succeed. Thus, the student who doesn't believe she can do the homework assigned will not attempt it; the student who believes he is incapable of passing the courses he needs to graduate will not exert much effort in class and may stop coming to school altogether (p. 35).

Being Outside of the School

Only two teachers mentioned leaving the school as a factor in engaging their students but it was a primary factor in each of the teacher's described experiences so I feel it is significant enough to include here. It is also another factor that it well supported in other research. It is possible that regardless of the potential benefits, most teachers do not leave the school as a result

of the challenges that we discussed later on in each focus group. Going outside of the school allows the students to enter an environment that is much more able to allow the other factors identified in this section to exist. Mary described it as, “I think as soon as you bring it into real life, you know, you taken them out of that learning environment and put them into something that is very relevant to what they have been doing every day.” Autonomy, relevance, and experiential education are much more likely outside of the school environment. Sue exclaimed, “So this is your chance to explore, so just giving them a freedom to explore and also allowing them to bring their cameras along on the field trip. They were excited. It was an outing for them.”

Luehmann and Markowitz (2007) in their study into out of school experiences with science noted that the teachers involved in the study indicated that increased student motivation was dramatic as a result of only a one day out of school experience at a university science lab and seemed to have a lasting impact on student engagement and interest in science back at school. They also noted that the teacher is the “gatekeeper” who ultimately has to decide whether or not to do the work and take the risk necessary for an out of school experience to occur.

Passionate and Knowledgeable Teachers

This theme is a major one as it was identified by four of the teachers. They felt that when teachers are knowledgeable and passionate about a topic, the students were more likely to be engaged. As Sue concluded, “Well, I think that one thing was that I was excited about it and so, and I had told them that. I had just reminded them that this is a hot topic.” Ruth said, “I just think that because I was excited about it, it was one of my passions and something I can get very animated about, that I think that just kind of bubbled over and you know, I got one kid hooked and the conversations just happened.”

The corollary to this theme was identified by focus group members that bored teachers make for bored students. It is very difficult for students to be excited about something when their teachers are not and show it. This is supported by Intrator (2004) who states that “energy and passion matter...energized, expressive teaching fosters energized learning; sedentary, monotonous teaching sabotages attention” (p. 23). At no time did the teachers indicate that

being knowledgeable meant that the only way students could be engaged is if their teacher knows everything. What these teachers were referring to was when the activity required someone to know how to make things work and be able to show others, they could.

Autonomy

Five of the teachers specified choice and control as being one of the factors that invited the authentic engagement they saw, which makes autonomy a major theme. These teachers felt that the students having control over part or all of an assignment or project had a direct positive impact on the level of engagement. As Ruth pointed out, “Which was great, and they were so excited about figuring this out all by themselves. And being given permission to do so. They were finally excited about something.” The opportunities for autonomy included being able to choose topics, deciding on what to create and not to create it, choosing to focus on interests, creating and deciding on questions, choosing books and selecting a presentation method. Mary specified, “They were really helpful and it was hilarious because it was design your own thing.”

This is supported by Cordova and Lepper (1996) who showed that the more choice and control over an activity a student was given, the greater his/her intrinsic motivation. Reeve (2006) states that “When teachers use classroom structure to control students’ behavior, then students’ motivation and learning suffer, but when teachers use the same aspect of classroom structure to support students’ autonomy, then students’ motivation and learning thrive” (p. 232).

Relevance

Six of the teachers in the focus groups identified relevance as being a significant factor in activities they described as leading to authentic engagement, which makes ‘relevance’ a major theme. When the activity or topic is relevant to their own lives and ties into things that they care about, students were more likely to exhibit engaged behaviors. In the words of Ruth, “They have been authentically engaged in what you are doing. Because they can see a purpose or they can see a connection to what happened in the classroom to what happened in life outside of classroom.”

This seems to be even more important with inner city youth whose lives are so filled with challenges just to survive that it is as if they do not have the time or the energy to put up with

things that are not relevant or are perceived to be a waste of time. When the story in a book actually connects to the problems they are facing in life outside of school, students were more likely to want to read it. Lisa explained,

Well, it's the fact that the book is completely relevant to their lives and experiences, but ties in all the history and the past, around all of the things we have kind of learned about, in bits and pieces through grade 6, 7 and 8. I have a 7, 8 class. And then it ties it into experiences that are relevant to the kids as they have been through some of these experiences, this is what they read and watch and what interests them. The language is authentic; the people in the book, the characters are authentic. And so it is completely relevant.

The teachers identified several different ways to make things more relevant including matching books, using technology to connect and integrate curriculum and doing things instead of just talking about them.

Support for relevance allowing and inviting student engagement can be found throughout the literature. The National Research Council (2004) states that “students enjoy learning more, and they learn better, when topics are personally interesting and related to their lives” (p. 52). Raphael, Pressley and Mohan (2008) identified “connects to students’ world outside school” (p. 76) and “connects to students’ world inside school” (p. 76) as two practices that support student engagement.

Experiential Education

Eight of the teachers referred to students getting to do something as being a big factor in being engaged which makes experiential education a major theme in the data. Aside from the books that the teachers described as engaging due to their relevance to their students’ lives, every activity the teachers described as engaging all had the students very involved in doing things as opposed to just hearing about them. Sue described a project to investigate environmental sustainability that involved a field trip to a number of locations around Saskatoon where in her own words, “They were excited.” Almost every aspect of the project involved the students having to do everything including forming their own research questions and actually doing the research. None of the teachers involved in the two focus groups identified their most engaged

moment as one where the students were primarily sitting and listening. Mitch described the reaction his students had to his hands-on dissection of animals as, “They were very excited about the activity because they had never done anything like that.” Jane talked about her students interest and conversation level around the topic of health as a result of their (her and her students) daily workouts on treadmills and stationary bikes.

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) indicate that the research has shown that the more hands on, the more authentic and challenging, the more complex and the more personal meaning, the greater the positive effect on behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement and the National Research Council (2004) stated the more active and hands-on the activity, the more engaged the students. The students would much rather be doing than sitting and listening.

Summary

The participants identified six factors that they felt led to the authentic student engagement: student competence, being outside of the school, passionate and knowledgeable teachers, autonomy, relevance, and experiential education. I found these answers very interesting as they so closely match much of the research that was described in my literature review. All of the participants talked about creating circumstances that invited and allowed for authentically engaged students which naturally led to the question why do they not create these circumstances all the time?

Challenges to engaging students

After examining what authentic engagement looks like and the different things that have worked in bringing it about, the focus groups discussed my main research question: What are the challenges that middle year teachers perceive in implementing student engagement strategies? All of the teacher responses repeatedly identified four main themes in the challenges of: time, money, other teachers and administration, and the students’ lives outside of school. These are the main stumbling blocks that these teachers have been dealing with in their efforts to authentically engage their students.

Time

While issues like preparation time have been the constant lament of many teachers, the teachers who raised the challenge of time brought up some other interesting points particularly around the issue of too much time being taken away from their primary job of teaching for things like professional development, school activities, and testing among other disruptions. A thirty minute assembly often ends up being a sixty minute interruption that always seems to happen right in the middle of the morning or afternoon which means that very little can be done by the students before or after. While all of these things, except for standardized testing, may seem benign or even beneficial, the reality is that all of them take away from student contact time and interrupts the flow that can be so crucial to building and creating engaging moments. In the words of Tracey, “Way too much professional development away from my classroom, which is disrupting the flow of what is going on in there and is disrupting everything.” Mitch stated,

To learn a new curriculum, there are so many variables that are being thrown at the teachers right now to learn all these new curriculums that time I think is my biggest stumbling block. Because I want to do a better job with everything that I do, but I can’t so it’s picking and choosing what I have to the time to do.

Schlechty (2002) feels that there needs to be more preparation time available to teachers and more “opportunities for collegial interaction” (p. 88). Teachers need to be able to work together when planning and even teaching. Kannapel, Aagaard, Coe, and Reeves, (2000) noted in their study on systematic school reform in Kentucky that teachers needed more time and stated that “A lack of time to incorporate new practices into the classroom compounded the inadequate number of professional development opportunities” (p. 134). Teachers got exhausted by the effort of trying new stuff on top of everything else they were already doing so they would just give up.

Fullan and Miles (1992) go even further when they state that “every analysis of the problems of change efforts that we have seen in the last decade of research and practice has concluded that time is the salient issue” (p. 750). Change takes time. Learning takes time. New curriculums and methods take time. All of these things need time for planning, for professional development and time with students without interruption which contradicts the first two. Are we

providing our teachers with enough time? According to the teachers that participated in my study, the answer is no.

Money or Resources

The participants did not think that they have enough money or resources available to do the engaging things they would like to do with their students. Examples given included: technology that is scarce, obsolete or is not capable of doing things, budgets for equipment, supplies and photocopying that are too small and run out before the school year does and physical facilities that are too small or non-existent. Eric argued, “You know, for me the biggest limitation is our physical facility. We don’t have a science room. We don’t have an art room. Our science and art room is a shared multipurpose room that is booked 24/7 so you can’t get in there.” These teachers want to use science equipment to engage their students in science but little exists and what does exist is not enough for an entire class. These teachers want to use the technology that their students use at home to make school work more relevant but they cannot because their school equipment is not up to the task or is not working. These teachers want to use manipulatives in math so as to provide engaging differentiated instruction but the money provided is not enough to provide every classroom with enough to be useful. Mitch shared, “I think that is part of our draw back, in that we are expected to do too much with too little because we are not given the money to do anything.”

With regards to its effects on education, Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) indicate that,

When learning is taking place in inadequate facilities, there tends not to be as clear a focus on academics, and the learning environment is less likely to be perceived as orderly and serious. Where school buildings are shabby and inadequate, there is less likely to be the kind of community engagement that supports teaching and learning. Teacher attitudes and behaviors are related as well, as teachers are less likely to show enthusiasm for their jobs and to go the extra mile with students to support their learning when they teach in buildings they judge to be of poor quality (p. 66).

Money becomes even more crucial in times of change. Fullan and Miles (1992) indicate that a key theme to reform success is that “change is resource-hungry” (p. 750) which includes money,

time, facilities, equipment, and staff. They go on to say that “change demands additional resources for training, for substitutes, for new materials, for new space, and, above all, for time.” (p. 750) This is supported by Johnson (2006) who agrees that a “lack of resources such as equipment, consumable supplies, and curriculum materials are political barriers to reform” (p. 152).

Teachers and Administration

This challenge was one that was identified by at least five of the teachers in one way or another. This theme refers to teachers who deliberately discourage or throw up road blocks for other teachers to do the things that they feel will engage their students. Steve, one of the younger and newer teachers in the focus groups, particularly identified older "fun suckers" as a constant challenge to this teacher trying new things.

I know that coming out being a new teacher I wanted to try these new things and a lot of them were like, ‘Na, that won’t work’. That was a big challenge, and that they shot down my ideas right away, and other younger teachers. So that might be another challenge is having some of the older teachers who suck the life out of the students and some of the new teachers trying things and new ideas.

It also refers to teachers, also identified as older, who are not willing to try or learn new things and are content to just get by. These teachers are busy planning their retirement. These teachers did not so much present a challenge to the teachers in the focus group but they did present a roadblock to their own students being engaged.

The school administration was also identified as having a large role to play in blocking or facilitating engagement strategies. The teachers talked about the support that they have experienced with their administration and specifically stated how important it was. They also talked about other teachers being blocked by their administration and the negative effect it had on student engagement. In the words of Mary, “Where as I know, at other schools talking to teachers, admin won’t let you go out of your classroom to film or out into the parks, or do what field trips are designed to do. So that challenge is having an administration that allows you to step outside of the classroom walls.” Tracy even indicated it was necessary to be subversive as

her main focus was on student engagement and she did not feel supported by administration in this goal.

The role of administration in the success of education reform has been well documented. Schlechty (2002) indicates that “top-level administrators, including building principals, cannot make change happen, but they can suppress the effects of changes they do not support just as certainly as teachers and community leaders can sabotage any change they do not understand or endorse. That is why systemic reform — reform that is simultaneously bottom up and top down — is so essential” (p. 45). Schlechty (2002) goes on to say that “real change in schools cannot occur as long as the way communities and parents define “real schools” reflects more their longing for the past than their anticipation of the future” (p. 46). Johnson (2006) agrees that there is a negative impact as a result of teachers and administrators not supporting instructional change on the efforts of those teachers who were trying something new.

Student Lives

The final challenge to authentic engagement coming out of my research is the lives of the students outside of school. Three of the teachers who taught at inner city schools identified over and over again all the things that their students had to deal with on a daily basis that constantly interfered with their desire to engage in school. Ruth pointed out, “I think it is definitely part of it, because if you are fighting continually against you know, poverty, hunger, jobs, looking after siblings, responsibilities, gangs, that is a challenge we face.” Issues like poverty, hunger, gangs, criminal activity, transportation, drugs and alcohol, jobs, babysitting, negligent and abusive parents, lack of sleep and learning disabilities. With all of this, it is more amazing that these students can even make it to school. McInerney (2009) states that “when students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance or withdraw their assent altogether from schooling” (p. 24). The existence of this challenge is also supported by Bowers (2000) who states that inner city schools have multiple challenges ranging from high rates of absenteeism to “transient population; a lack of parental and/or guardian participation in the school lives of the students; and personal, economic, and family situations that may have a negative impact on students’ learning” (p. 235).

This is not just an inner city youth problem as two other teachers brought it up with regards to students who were dealing with other things like jobs, friends, and the perceived irrelevancy of school compared to the rest of their life. I think that teachers tend to perceive school as more important than everyone else because it is our career and we can forget that school is only one part of a student's life. This challenge is also the hardest to deal with or solve solely in the education system if at all. This is a societal challenge that will continue until our entire community deals with it. Jane said it best perhaps, offering

The challenges are above and beyond us. It's poverty, it's transportation, it's justice, it's drugs and alcohol. It's jobs for many other kids, they have to work massive numbers of hours and they can't get up and go to school. It's taking care of siblings. I don't know if there is a whole bunch that we can do to take away some of the challenges, other than make the experience they have in the classroom when they are in the classroom be as positive as possible.

Summary

The participants identified four main challenges to engaging middle years students: time, money, other teachers and administration, and the students' lives outside of school. None of the participants described these challenges as insurmountable. All of the participants still worked towards engaging their middle year students. These challenges were identified as making it more difficult to invite and allow authentic student engagement.

What can be done about the challenges

I feel fairly confident that the themes I have identified around the challenges in engaging middle years students were all strongly represented by the members of my focus groups. I did not perceive that same level of consensus when it came to possible solutions to the challenges. In fact, many of the ideas proposed by the groups did not necessarily address the challenges they had previously identified or only did so in an indirect way. That being said, there was one idea that many of the teachers brought up as needing to happen – that is, teacher collaboration.

Teacher Collaboration

The one consistent theme that was identified by a majority of the focus group participants was that of teacher collaboration. The teachers want opportunities to meet and share with other teachers. The focus group discussion itself seemed to be the catalyst for identifying the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers as important, necessary and lacking. Lisa put it this way:

Somebody said that staff meeting, and having that time together, by the time the administrator is done, we always just want to go home, but I wish we had time, there may be only 2-3 of us, but I wish there was more of an avenue for us, where we could get together in the middle years and talk about what some of our issues are. From this session alone I have gotten 6-7 awesome lesson ideas and I appreciate that from everyone in the group.

Teachers do not want to be lectured at. In Eric's words,

Give us the opportunity to come down, bring a couple units that you are doing and lets share. Like a make and take, this is positive stuff that we need to be doing. Not sitting listening to a speaker about something that you are thinking, holy crap I should be teaching my math right now.

Much of their professional development experience has involved them being lectured to and sharing under rigidly controlled parameters without quality time to do it in.

Real networking opportunities were identified as desired by new and experienced teachers alike. Newmann *et al.* (1992) endorses the notion that teachers need more time to work together with other teachers. If collaboration works so well for students, it's logical that it works just as well for teachers. They go on to muse that the subversive reality is that we probably do not want higher-order thinking because "critical thinking also increases the probability of youth challenging adult authority and of citizens challenging economic and political centers of power" (Newmann *et al.* 1992. p. 86).

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) state that "from the teacher's perspective, one of the peculiarities of the workplace is that learning aimed at deepening knowledge of the subject matters of instruction must be done outside of school, during so-called free time...despite

lip service to lifelong learning, the norms of American schools create a situation in which community for teacher learning is found (if found at all) outside of the workplace” (p. 947-948). Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) go on to state that: “successful forms of professional development must offer multiple corridors for participation. (p. 953) [and that] We cannot expect teachers to create a vigorous community of learners among students if they have no parallel community to nourish themselves” (p. 993) .

Mitch pointed out that, “The thing is, what we need to do as a division is talk to people, and we don’t do that. We don’t talk to the teachers to find out how things are working.” Schlechty (2002) agrees that “serious efforts to design schoolwork that is authentically engaging to most students most of the time probably cannot be done without considerably more opportunities for collegial interaction than is typical in most schools today” (p. 88).

Summary

The participants in my focus groups felt that authentic engagement was evident when the students were paying attention, were physically involved, caught up in the moment, having fun and when you could hear their voices. They identified competence, being outside of school, passionate and knowledgeable teachers, autonomy, relevance and experiential education as being factors in what they did to engage students. For the group of 10 teachers, the challenges to engaging students included time, resources, other teachers and administration, and the students’ lives outside of school.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

So now what? I started this journey with the idea of doing research into what educational practices are best to authentically engage students. I had some ideas of my own from my own experiences as a teacher who felt that I had experienced some success at it. What I discovered early on in my journey to completing my Masters was that there was and is sufficient research into authentically engaging teaching practices and it has existed for quite some time. So as I mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, my research focus shifted from the students to the teachers. If we know what engages students, and the research would seem to indicate that we do, why are so many students not engaged in school? I became interested in the teacher side of the equation because in so many ways, the teacher is the gatekeeper to what occurs in the classroom (Gordon and Crabtree, 2006). I realized that regardless of the research, authentically engaging experiences were not the norm in many classrooms (Klem & Connell, 2004) and I wanted to know why.

Engagement Is?

I wanted to know what teachers thought authentic engagements looked like. It was entirely possible that teachers thought that quiet, well behaved students who complacently sat in rows of desks were authentically engaged and thus worksheets and lectures were the way to go. If this was the case, I would have my answer. None of the ten participants in my focus groups felt this way. While some of them did identify paying attention as indicating engagement, even those teachers qualified this description by stating that asking questions was part of it. The most common description of engagement from the group of ten was that of hearing student voices. Productive noise, excited noise, fun noise and noise about school outside of school were all given as an indication that students were engaged. Any argument against noise is only valid until the next teacher professional development session where teachers fill any available space with “wasted” conversation as they catch up with colleagues and still manage to accomplish all that has been set before them. A few of the teachers also described their students as being engaged because they were physically involved and having fun. Something that I found curious was that only two teachers thought that having fun and only three teachers thought that students

being caught up in the moment indicated engagement. In my own experience, when students are having fun and / or are so caught up that everything else is ignored including dismissal bells, then you have hit the sweet spot of authentic student engagement. So the question becomes why did so few teachers feel that having fun and being caught up indicated engagement? Are there too many challenges to strive for this state? Do they honestly not want it? Did they not recognize it for what it was, engaged students? Or, is it connected with what I said in Chapter Two when I talked about my definition of engagement? Is being caught up and having fun or experiencing “flow” (Shernoff et al, 2003) possible in our current system of schooling? Could it be that few teachers describe flow as the ultimate engagement because few teachers have ever witnessed it? In other words, for flow to become the oft witnessed state of the students, does the system have to change, do the teachers have to change or do both have to change?

Factors That Led To Engagement?

Once I had a clearer picture of how the ten teachers in my focus groups viewed student engagement, then I wanted to know what factors may have led to the authentic student engagement they observed. What I actually asked the focus group participants was to describe an educational experience where they saw the examples of authentic engagement they had described earlier. From the experience, I asked them to pinpoint what it was about the experience that may have led to the engaged students. The factors that they identified were almost a mirror image of the factors that I described in my review of the literature. They described experiences where students were able to feel competent, be out of school and have passionate and knowledgeable teachers. Even more of the focus group participants indicated that autonomy, relevance and experiential education were present and were potential factors in the increased student engagement that they witnessed. One piece of the mirror is conspicuously missing. Not one participating teacher mentioned that relationships or collaboration among students were a factor in inviting and allowing for student engagement.

There are two possibilities that I can see for this absence. First, it is possible that none of the participants believe that relationships or student collaboration could have a positive impact on student engagement. Knowing what I know personally and professionally about many of the participants, I would be very surprised if this is the case. The second, more likely reason in my

opinion, is that I specifically asked the group to describe an experience where they observed what they felt was authentic student engagement and then to identify what the factors were within that experience that may have invited and allowed for engagement. Teacher-student and student-student relationships are seldom just one factor in one experience. They are a factor in the entire classroom experience. I did not ask the participants about what they felt in general could lead to increased student engagement which perhaps, in hindsight, I should have. And while collaboration was not specifically identified by any teacher, as I read back through the focus group transcripts, at least six of the experiences described by the teachers would have required student collaboration in order to have taken place.

So why was student collaboration most likely present but not identified as a factor in possibly increasing student engagement? It has been identified in the research as having a positive effect. Johnson (2008) states that “It appears that collaborative learning methods are positively associated with academic engagement” (p. 80) and Fredricks et al. (2004) state “cognitive engagement is enhanced when class members actively discuss ideas, debate points of view, and critique each other’s work” (p. 77). Why did these participants who earlier identified student voices as indicating higher levels of engagement not point out the collaboration among students that would be the likely result of student voices being heard? Is it because of what I cautioned about collaboration previously in Chapter Two? Do we as teachers take student collaboration for granted and neglect to explicitly teach students effective methods to being part of a team and also fail to recognize its positive impact on engaging middle year’s students?

Challenges To Engagement?

After we had discussed what authentic engagement looked like and what factors could lead to it, I asked the teachers for the challenges that they faced. As they had identified many of the same factors that I had through my own experience and reading, I wanted to know why they just did not teach like that all the time. As I examine the four main challenges that the ten participants identified in my focus groups, I am going to discuss how I dealt with them as a regular classroom teacher before I became involved in Let’s Lead – Nīkānētān. Our program has extraordinary resources given to it that render most of the challenges moot. It is unreasonable to expect teachers in a regular classroom setting to do the things we do in it. It was my intention

right from the beginning of my research to find out what some of the challenges might be so as to possibly give guidance to teachers in freeing themselves from them. I will also examine whether the challenge is a system imposed problem that can only be dealt with by changing the system or is a self-imposed link in the chain. In other words, do we perceive a barrier when there really isn't one?

While I truly believe that the system of schooling as it predominately exists today does need to be radically changed, preferably with a jackhammer, I do not believe that such systematic change is required before authentic student engagement can be invited and allowed to occur. All of the factors identified by the teachers in the two focus groups along with the others that I presented from the literature can take place in our current system. I know. I have done it. The ten teachers in my focus groups have done it as well. That being said, the participants did identify four challenges to engaging middle years students: time, resources, teachers and administration, and students' lives outside of school. At no point did the participants indicate that these challenges acted as a barrier that prevented them from engaging students. They were simply challenges. They all still sought to do engaging things with their students and in order to do so, they often had to deal with and overcome these challenges. That being said, while these challenges were not acting as barriers all of the time, they must have at least some of the time as they were presented as reasons why the participants did not do the engaging things they described all day, every day.

Challenge 1: Time

The challenge of time was multi-faceted from issues of needing more time to collaborate, prepare and learn new curriculums to interruptions that stole and broke up valuable engagement time. This challenge even managed to conflict with itself because in getting more professional development time, we then face less time with our students. The challenge of time is a modern society created barrier. I feel that we are ruled by time or let ourselves be ruled by time. Whenever I am able to take students on an overnight camping trip, this challenge almost completely evaporates as our constant reliance on the clock disappears. We all have a part to play in overcoming this barrier.

As a school system, we must ensure that any time we take teachers away from their students is used purposefully and effectively and the teachers, and thus the students, benefit. System wide professional development where students are not in school works well as compared to professional development where replacement teachers are required which then means time needed for the teachers to plan and worry about what is happening in their classroom while they are away. Meanwhile, a hoped for outcome a teacher has for their classroom while he or she is away are that there is no serious behaviour issues and maybe some work actually got done. Engaged students are not a high priority.

As a school, we should examine events and interruptions carefully and weigh their value against the time taken from the classroom. School assemblies, announcements, special activities all take time and always more than expected. Just because someone thinks something is nifty does not mean it is automatically worth the value of the time it takes from students with their teacher in class. I have deliberately not gone to assemblies because they were not as worthwhile as what I was doing in class. If need be, I have arranged to have my class gone from the school at the time of the “special” assembly. As classroom teachers, we must approach the issue of time with an eye to engagement. Throughout my career, I have taken advantage of our K-8 elementary system and have taken part in as few teacher exchanges as I could. As much as possible, I taught my students for the entire school day. This allowed my students and me to control our flow through the day and not have it subject to an external force such as a timetable. The best solution to the issue of time is to ignore it. For teachers who are in an elementary system where scheduling subjects and teacher exchanges is under the control of a homeroom teacher, the fewer exchanges created, the less of a challenge time will be. Teachers can treat their schedules as more of a guide than the law. Just because the timetable says that science is over at 9:45am, if something engaging is happening, then science can continue. For teachers in a junior high setting where timetables are set and students move from teacher to teacher throughout the day, then teachers can collaborate with one another to integrate the subject areas and thus integrate the timetable.

Challenge 2: Resources

Another challenge that was identified was that of resources, or lack thereof. Challenges with resources included technology that was too old or did not work properly, not enough space or facilities to teach in, and not enough materials to teach with. Even as the participants were presenting a lack of resources as a challenge, they were also talking about how they dealt with it. I have always found the issue of resources and teachers' laments about their lack to be interesting as I personally have not found the lack of resources to be particularly challenging or an obstacle to inviting and allowing authentic student engagement. When one looks at the factors that the focus group participants and the literature identify as having a positive impact on student engagement (competence, going out of the school, passionate and knowledgeable teachers, autonomy, relevance, experiential education and collaboration), none of them require technology, a dedicated science or art room, more photocopying or more manipulatives. My students and I have made our own manipulatives every year and in the process gained a better understanding of what we were learning about.

It is highly unlikely that we are ever going to be able to have the best technology available and many of our students are surrounded by it in their personal lives anyway. None of the engagement factors are enhanced by having a smart board at the front of the room. I would argue that much of technology pulls us away from authentic engagement as it enhances traditional direct instruction instead of forcing or allowing us to break of that model. I have had thirty-three grade seven students in my class and whenever possible, we would leave the school and walk to the nearest park with all of our books and materials. We would spend the day writing, drawing, reading, doing math, and playing in the trees, on the grass and under the sun. There was no set schedule, there were no bells, and there was no need for artificial classroom management. Authentic student engagement occurred in spite of having no resources. I had no technology. I had no photocopier. I did not even have a roof over my head.

I think it comes down to whether you are a glass half full or glass half empty kind of person. If you are a glass half full person, then you see opportunities in every moment of every day. They might not be the ones you had hoped or planned for but they are opportunities for engaging learning nevertheless. If you are a glass half empty kind of person, you could have access to all the technology in the world, be ensconced in the best supplied science room of the

school system, and be given an unlimited photocopying budget and you would still lament that engagement was impossible because you did not have an HD 3-D video camera. An area for further research would be to see how teachers engage when they engage. What do engaging teachers use to authentically engage their students? Do teachers who have access to science rooms or SMART boards use them to authentically engage. In other words, how crucial are resources to authentic engagement or is it a self-imposed challenge?

Challenge 3: Other Staff and Administration

The third challenge identified in creating the conditions that invited and allowed authentic student engagement to occur was other staff, particularly other teachers and school administrators. In order to address this challenge, I feel that I must individually address the three groups involved: other teachers, the teachers who are looking to invite engagement, and the administration. Some of the participants in my focus groups, specifically the younger and less experienced teachers, described other teachers in their buildings putting up barriers to creating the conditions that have been shown to invite and allow engagement. It is to these teachers that I say, “Stop!” These ‘new’ things that these young teachers are implementing are supported by research. You may not think it is going to work and you may not be comfortable with it but no one is asking or telling you to do it. The very least you can do is get out of the way of those who are willing to take risks. Even better, support them, encourage them, give them constructive feedback, or ask questions to challenge and improve their methods. To the teachers who are faced with these naysayers, do not stop and do not give up. It really does not matter what other teachers think. The only power they have over you is the power that you grant them. Do not let them dictate what happens in your classroom. It is bad enough that they have likely created a less than engaging environment in their classroom, do not let them do it in yours.

Regarding principals and other administration, the literature (Seashore, 2009, Huber & Muijs, 2010) indicates that the administration of a school plays a large role in creating an environment within a school that invites and allows teachers to try new things like the factors for authentic student engagement talked about earlier. I have struggled with this challenge because I personally have not been affected by other teachers or my administration. The students in my class were happy to come to school. The parents of my students were happy because their

middle years children were happy to come to school. The administration seldom had to deal with my students due to behavior issues. As a result of this, and perhaps some fortunate administration assignments, I have never felt that I needed to limit what I did in my classroom to create an engaging environment. This being said, I would think teachers are far more likely to try something unconventional and new to them, which many of these strategies are, if the administration of the school is in support of it (Brown & Anfara, 2003). As the teacher is the gatekeeper of the classroom, the principal could be viewed as the gatekeeper of the school. To continue with this analogy, if the best a teacher can do it to create the conditions that allow and invite authentic student engagement so too the administrator for the teachers. All an administrator can do is to create a school climate that invites, allows, encourages, and celebrates new ideas and more engaging ideas and activities. An administrator cannot make any teacher teach in a specific manner. An administrator can actively act to discourage methods that he or she does not like but this is usually only effective, ironically, when these methods are different from traditionally accepted teaching strategies such as lecturing. Trying to force teachers to adopt engagement strategies is to almost guarantee that they will not be used. I did not set out to write about educational change and reform but that is where it seems I am going. I find it unfortunate that to talk about engagement strategies means to talk about having to reform education, especially since most of the factors identified have been at the crux of many educational reform movements of the last one hundred years. The notion that administrators play a significant role in inviting and allowing teachers to take risks and try out activities that incorporate authentic engagement strategies raises some interesting questions for me and could be an area of further research. Are school divisions aware of the influence of their school administration? How does this awareness affect their hiring practices? How do their hiring practices jibe with their stated division goals? In other words, if a school division states that it wants its students to be engaged, are they hiring administrators with support for teachers in this area being explicit? Are school divisions walking the walk or just talking the talk?

Challenge 4: Student Lives Outside of School

Our students do not exist in a vacuum. School is only one part of their lives and it could very well be a very trivial part in comparison to what else is going on in their lives. It is also the

challenge that we have the least, if any, control over which could mean that it is also our greatest challenge. This challenge comes to us from every single student in our classrooms. It may come in varying degrees and types but every student comes to us with a life that affects them outside of school and it is unreasonable of us, and potentially impossible for them, to expect them to put their lives on hold for the five hours they spend in school. This challenge cannot be solved in the sense of being eliminated but its effects can be mitigated by the teacher through flexibility and understanding. Differentiated instruction does not just refer to academic ability but also to responding to the different needs of each student in the classroom. It is a systematic challenge but not one created by the education system. The biggest mistake a teacher can make is thinking that the best way to deal with this problem is to ignore it.

Bridgeland, DiIvlio and Morison (2005) found that many students who dropped out did so because of things in their lives such as needing to get a job to support themselves, getting pregnant or having to look after a relative. In order to address this challenge, teachers need to recognize that just as they themselves have a life outside and separate from school, so to do each and every one of their students. Once teachers accept the fact that school might not be the most important thing in their students' lives, they are then ready to start addressing this challenge. As a teacher in inner city schools for the past eight years, I have become well aware that school and the issue of school are often the least of my students' concerns. This experience, combined with the research that went into the creation of the LLN program described earlier, has led to some beliefs and practices that we have experienced success with in dealing with this challenge.

The first of the beliefs is the importance of forming and maintaining real and honest relationships between everyone in our classroom. This means being willing to take the time to develop the relationships before jumping into the academic workload. It is through relationships that teachers will become aware of their students and their students' lives and thus be able to respond appropriately. It is through relationships that teachers can be flexible and understanding of the unique needs that each of their students have. It is also through relationships that students will have flexibility and understanding with their teachers. If we teach students and not content, then it is okay if a student does not focus during a lecture because they did not get enough sleep last night. Taking the time to form these relationships is time well spent.

The other belief that we have is the importance of not assigning homework. Specifically, we do not assign homework that cannot be completed at school and must be done at home. Our students complete a lot of projects and assignments which may at times need to be completed on their own time but that usually happens when they do not use given school time productively. We agree with Kohn (2006) that school time is school time and home time is our students' own time. Our students have enough going on in their lives that they do not need added pressure. When a teacher assigns homework that can only be done at home, that teacher is not honoring their students' lives outside of school. For some students, it is impossible for them to do any work, including read a book, outside of school. Removing homework outside of school entirely for our students eliminates a large stressor for both the students and the teacher. My primary focus in presenting our philosophy on no homework was to demonstrate how homework and the challenge of students' lives outside of school conflict with each other. The best solution to this conflict is to eliminate homework. For those who decry this elimination because they feel that homework somehow benefits students, I would ask the question, says who? Kohn (2006) points out that homework is an educational practice that is simply not supported by research. Eren & Henderson (2011), indicate that there is very little research into homework's effect on achievement scores. Of the research that has been done, the only significantly positive effect on achievement comes from high school math (Eren & Henderson, 2011). A lot of time is being wasted and a lot of stress is being caused by something that has no demonstrated value. This would not be considered good practice in any organization and should not be so in education.

Areas of Further Research and Work

I have stated that I believe most teachers are satisfied with ritual engagement as it meets all the requirements of what looks like good teaching. Is this true? What kind of engagement do teachers actually want? Are they satisfied with ritual engagement? Do they actually want authentic engagement? How would teachers feel or deal with students who were authentically engaged and the potential 'mess' that would occur?

With regards to future work, I have already used some of my work on this thesis to support the development of our Let's Lead – Nīkānētān program. Now I want to take this further. I want to create a more comprehensive and approachable document that outlines the

different areas of research in engagement that we utilize in our program for middle years students and combine them with practical methods of implementation for teachers.

Limitations

1. Throughout this study, I have been aware of my own personal bias towards the entire subject of student engagement and the challenges. I might have not said things I should have because I have been so concerned about my convictions on this subject tainting my research.
2. I had a small number of participants (ten) in my two focus groups. I was supposed to have more but due to unforeseen circumstances, the other participants were unable to make it and time constraints meant I could not do more.
3. Inherently, the types of teachers that would respond and agree to participate in a study on engagement are more likely to be favorably disposed towards the importance of engaging students.
4. In my opinion, after reading the transcripts, I did not do a very good job of keeping the conversation on track with regards to the final focus group question: how to overcome the challenges? This means that I did not get a cohesive picture of how they felt the challenges could be overcome.

Conclusion

So what did I find out? Plainly stated, I found out that authentically engaging middle years students is not easy. It is not easy because it takes time and time is often one thing we think we do not have enough of. It is not easy because we think it is more accessible when we have effective resources at our fingertips. It is not easy because it is not the norm and challenging the status quo means being prepared to stand up to other teachers and administration who may not be in our corner. It is not easy because school takes up only 15% of the time in our students' week so it should not be surprising when the other 85% of their lives gets in the way.

So if authentically engaging middle years students is challenging, messy and potentially disruptive, is it a worthwhile goal? If you view the function of education and schools through a lens of developing lifelong learners who can work well with others and be able to approach the

problems of our world with an open mind, I would think that you would want an educational environment that is as engaging as possible. On the other hand, if the lens that you are looking through is of content and values transmission and achievement scores then I would think that you too want an educational environment that is an engaging as possible because it has been clearly demonstrated that higher engagement leads to higher achievement (Heller, Calderon & Medrich, 2003) and lower dropout rates (Newmann, 1992).

I wanted and still want all students in school to be provided as engaging an environment as possible. I do not expect students to be engaged all the time. I do not believe that it is feasible for anyone to be engaged all of the time. I do desire for all students that their teachers seek out and implement strategies to create as engaging a classroom environment as possible. In order to do this, I sought to shed some light on some of the challenges that prevented some teachers from doing so all the time. By examining and discussing these challenges, I hope that I managed to also share some ways of overcoming them.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, J. & Ryan, T. (1999). *Constructing knowledge, reconstructing schooling*. *Educational Leadership*, 57(3), 66-69.
- Armstrong, D. G. (2002). Influences of philosophy, learning theory and sociology. *Curriculum today* (pp. 105-129). Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Autry, C. E. (2001). Adventure therapy with girls at-risk: Responses to outdoor experiential activities. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 35(4), 289-306.
- Barnes, J. L., & Bramley, S. A. (2008). Increasing high school student engagement in classroom activities by implementing real-world projects with choice, goals portfolios, and goals conferencing. Saint Xavier University & Pearson Achievement Solutions, Inc.).
- Beuscher, S., Keuer, L., Muehlich, S., & Tyra, C. (1997). Improving student engagement. Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight).
- Brand, D. (2001). A longitudinal study of the effects of a wilderness-enhanced program on behaviour-disordered adolescents. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 6(1), 40-56.
- Bowers, R. (2000). A pedagogy of success: Meeting the challenges of urban middle schools. *The Clearing House*. 73(4), 235-238.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Bridgeland, J. M., DiJulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.
- Brooks, L. R., Haley, K., McCann, P., Moore, K., & Pearson, D. (2000). *Improving students' social skills of respect and responsibility through cooperative groups*. (Masters, Saint Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois)

- Brown, K. M., & Anfara, Jr., V. A. (2003). Paving the way for change: Visionary leadership in action at the middle level. *NASSP Bulletin*, 87(635), 16-34.
- Colton, T. (2008). Women's perceptions of quality of household work. (Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan).
- Conley, L., Caldarella, P., & Young, E. (2007). Evaluation of a ropes course experience for at-risk secondary school students. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 30(1), 21-35.
- Cordova, D. I., & Lepper, M. R. (1996). Intrinsic motivation and the process of learning: Beneficial effects of contextualization, personalization, and choice. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(4), 715-730.
- Cosgriff, M. (2000). Walking our talk: Adventure based learning and physical education. *Journal of Physical Education New Zealand*, 33(2), 89-98.
- Daheim, T. J. (1998). Effects of ropes course therapy on individual perceptions of the classroom environment. (Ph.D., Oklahoma State University).
- Davis, H. A. (2006). *Exploring the contexts of relationship quality between middle school students and teachers*. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 193-223.
- Davis-Berman, J., & Berman, D. (2002). Risk and anxiety in adventure programming. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 25(2), 305-310.
- Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and Education*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Dickson, T. J., & Gray, T. (2006). Facilitating experiences: A snap shot of what is happening out there. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 10(2), 41-52.
- Eren, O. & Henderson, D. J. (2011). Are we wasting our children's time by giving them more homework? *Economics of Education Review*, 30(5), 950-961.

- Feinstein, S. (2004). *Secrets of the teenage brain: Research-based strategies for reaching & teaching today's adolescents*. San Diego, CA: The Brain Store.
- Forgan, J. W., & Jones, C. D. (2002). How experiential adventure activities can improve students' social skills. *Teaching Exceptional Children [H.W.Wilson - EDUC]*, 34(3), 52-58.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109.
- Fullan, M. G., & Miles, M. B. (1992). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(10), 744-752.
- Gillis, H. L. Lee, & Thomsen, D. (1996). A research update of adventure therapy (1992-1995): Challenge activities and ropes courses, wilderness expeditions, and residential camping programs. *Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Research Symposium Proceedings*, Bradford Woods, Indiana. 77-90.
- Glass, J. S., & Benshoff, J. M. (2002). Facilitating group cohesion among adolescents through challenge course experiences. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 25(2), 268-277.
- Gordon, G., & Crabtree, S. (2006). *Building engaged schools: Getting the most out of America's classrooms*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Graham, L. B., & Robinson, E. M. (2007). Project adventure and self concept of academically talented adolescent boys. *Physical Educator*, 64(3), 114-122.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record*. 103(6), 942-1012.
- Helle, L., Tynjälä, P., & Olkinuora, E. (2006). *Project-Based Learning in Post-Secondary Education – Theory, Practice and Rubber Sling Shots*. *Higher Education*, 51(2), 287-314.

- Heller, R., Calderon, S., & Medrich, E. (2003). *Academic achievement in the middle grades: What does research tell us? A review of the literature*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Hemenway, M. V. (2000). *What effect does classroom use of the internet have on the teacher-student relationship?* NASSP Bulletin, 84(615), 114-119.
- Huber, S.G., & Muijs, D. (2010). School leadership effectiveness - the growing insight in the importance of school leadership for the quality and development of schools and their pupils. In: S.G Huber (Hrsg.), *School Leadership - International Perspectives*. Springer.
- Intrator, S. (2004). The engaged classroom. *Educational Leadership*, 62, 20-24.
- Johnson, C. (2006). Effective professional development and change in practice: Barriers science teachers encounter and implications for reform. *School Science and Mathematics*, 106(3), 150-161.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. (1999). Making cooperative learning work. *Theory into Practice*, 38(2), 67-73.
- Johnson, L. S. (2008). Relationship of instructional methods to student engagement in two public high schools. *American Secondary Education*, 36(2), 69-87.
- Kadokia, M. (2005). Increasing student engagement by using Morrowind to analyze choices and consequences. *TechTrends*, 49(5), 29-32.
- Kannapel, P. J., Aagaard, L., Coe, P., & Reeves, C. A. (2000). *Elementary change: Moving toward systemic school reform in rural Kentucky*. Charleston, WV: AEL Distribution Center.
- Kayes, A. B., Kayes, D. C., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). *Experiential learning in teams*. *Simulation & Gaming*, 36(3), 330-354.

- Kemp, T., & McCarron, L. (1998). Learning new behaviours through group adventure initiative tasks: A theoretical perspective. *Exploring the boundaries of adventure therapy: International perspectives* (). Leederville, WA: Camping and Outdoor Education Association of Western Australia.
- Klem, A. M. & Connell, J. P. (2004). *Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement*. *The Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 262-273.
- Kohn, A., (1992). Resistance to cooperative learning: Making sense of its deletion and dilution. *Journal of Education*, 174(2), 38-56.
- Kohn, A., (1999). *The schools our children deserve*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Kohn, A. (2006). *The homework myth: why our kids get too much of a bad thing*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Krajcik, J. & Blumenfeld, P. (2006). *Project-Based Learning*. In R. Sawyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of The Learning Sciences* (pp. 317-333). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Leberman, S. I., & Martin, A. J. (2002). Does pushing comfort zones produce peak learning experiences? *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 7(1), 10-19.
- Lightner, S., Bober, M. J., & Willi, C. (2007). Team-based activities to promote engaged learning. *College Teaching*, 55(1), 5-18.
- Litoselliti, L. (2003). *Using focus groups in research*. New York: NY: Continuum.

- Luehmann, A. & Markowitz, D. (2007). Science teachers' perceived benefits of an out-of-school enrichment programme: Identity needs and university affordances. *International Journal of Science Education*, 29(9), 1133-1161.
- Magnotto, J. N. (1996). Grounded theory: Research as praxis. *Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication*, Milwaukee, WI.
- Marks, H. M. (2000). *Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 153-184.
- Marx, R., Blumenfeld, P., Krajcik, J., Soloway, E. (1997). *Enacting Project-Based Science*. *The Elementary School Journal*, 97 (4), 341-358. Retrieved July 6, 2007, from JSTOR database.
- McInerney, P. (2009). Toward a critical pedagogy of engagement for alienated youth: insights from Freire and school-based research. *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(1), 23-35.
- McKenzie, M. D. (2000). How are adventure education program outcomes achieved?: A review of the literature. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 5(1), 19-27.
- McLeod, B., & Allen-Craig, S. (2007). What outcomes are we trying to achieve in our outdoor education programs? *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 11(2), 41-49.
- McMahon, B. & Portelli, J. (2004). Engagement for what? Beyond popular discourses of student engagement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 3(1), 59-76.
- Moote, G. T., Jr, & Wodarski, J. S. (1997). The acquisition of life skills through adventure-based activities and programs: A review of the literature. *Adolescence*, 32(125), 143-167.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Munns, G. (2007). A sense of wonder: pedagogies to engage students who live in poverty. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 11(3), 301-315.

- National Research Council (U.S.). (c2004.). In Institute of Medicine (U.S.) (Ed.), *Engaging schools :Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.
- Newmann, F. M. (Ed.). (1992). *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*. New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University.
- Newmann, F. M., Wehlage, G. G., & Lamborn, S. D. (1992). *The significance and sources of student engagement*. In F. M. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools* (pp. 11-39). New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University.
- Noddings, N. (1995). *Teaching themes of caring*. The Education Digest [H.W.Wilson - EDUC], 61, 24-28.
- Noddings, N. (c2005.). *The challenge to care in schools :An alternative approach to education (2nd ed. ed.)*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ornstein, A. C., & Hunkins, F. P. (2004). The field of curriculum. *Curriculum: Foundations, principles, and issues* (4th ed. ed., pp. 1-29). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effects of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 270-300.
- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (1997). *Effective leadership in adventure programming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-246.

- Raphael, L. M., Pressley, M., & Mohan, L. (2008). Engaging instruction in middle school classrooms: An observational study of nine teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 109(1), 61-81.
- Reeve, J. (2006). Teachers as facilitators: What autonomy-supportive teachers do and why their students benefit. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 225-236.
- Rohnke, K. (1991). *Bottomless baggie*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Rohnke, K., & Butler, S. (1995). *QuickSilver*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Schlechty, P. C. (2002). *Working on the work: An action plan for teachers, principals, and superintendents*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.
- Schoel, J., Prouty, D., & Radcliffe, P. (1988). *Islands of healing. A guide to adventure based counseling*. Hamilton, MA: Project Adventure, Inc.
- Seashore, K. (2009). Leadership and change in schools: personal reflections over the last 30 years. *Journal of Educational Change* 10(2-3), 129-140.
- Sheard, M., & Golby, J. (2006). The efficacy of an outdoor adventure education curriculum on selected aspects of positive psychological development. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 29(2), 187-209.
- Sherhoff, D. J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Schneider, B., & Sherhoff, E. S. (2003). Student engagement in high school classrooms from the perspective of flow theory. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 18(2), 158-176.
- Smith, L. M., & Pohland, P. A. (1969). *Grounded theory and educational ethnography: A methodological analysis and critique*. St. Ann, MO: Central Midwestern Regional Educational Lab.

- Thomas, J. (2000). *A Review Of Research On Project-Based Learning*. Retrieved July 6, 2007 from http://www.bie.org/index.php/site/RE/pbl_research/29
- Uline, C., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2008). The walls speak: the interplay of quality facilities, school climate, and student achievement. *Journal of Education Administration*, 46(1), 55-73.
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Vibert, A. B., & Shields, C. (2003). Approaches to student engagement: Does ideology matter? *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 221-240.
- Wentzel, K. R. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 411-419.
- Wolfe, B. D., & Dattilo, J. (2006). Participants' perceptions of communication during and after a one-day challenge course program. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 29(2), 126-144.
- Wolfe, B. D., & Samdahl, D. M. (2005). Challenging assumptions: Examining fundamental beliefs that shape challenge course programming and research. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 28(1), 25-43.
- Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re)conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(7), 1765-1776.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

How would you like a FREE SUPPER at the Cave Restaurant on 8th street?

Now that I have your attention, I would like to invite you to a free supper with 5 other middle years teachers and all you have to do is share in the conversation for about 1.5 to 2 hours. The conversation will be about the challenges that middle years' teachers face as they seek to authentically engage their students and to identify ways to overcome these challenges.

By participating in the discussion, you will be potentially helping middle years and secondary teachers across our school division and beyond address these challenges and you get a chance to relax with fellow middle years teachers and enjoy a free meal.

Below you will find some more of the details about this study which I hope you will read. This is not the consent form. If you are interested in participating in this study, you can fill out the sections on the back of this letter and inter-school mail it to me, Chris Clark, at Bedford Road Collegiate or you can simply email me at clarkch@spsd.sk.ca with your answers. I will send the consent form to those who are interested in participating. I will also be providing more specifics about the focus group questions to those who are interested in participating prior to the actual focus group.

I look forward to hearing from you. If you know of any other middle years teacher (grades 7 to 9) who might also be interested, please feel free to pass the invitation to them as well.

Researcher:

Chris Clark
Masters of Education Student
Curriculum Studies

Supervisor:

Lynn Lemisko
Curriculum Studies
College of Education

College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306 220 2368
cdc127@mail.usask.ca

University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306 966 7581
Fax: 306 966 7658
lynn.lemisko@usask.ca

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this study is to identify and examine the challenges that middle years' teachers face as they seek to authentically engage their students and to identify ways to overcome these challenges.

Procedure: It is my plan to have three to five focus groups with 6 to 10 middle years teachers in each. All of the teachers will be middle years teachers which will be defined as teaching at least one class of grade 7 to 9 students in the previous year. All of the teachers are being recruited from the Saskatoon Public School Division. Each focus group will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours, including the meal, and will take place at The Cave in the meeting room. Supper will be provided to the participants free of charge as a thank-you for taking part in the focus group.

My research question deals with teachers' perceptions of the challenges to implementing currently identified student engagement strategies. It is my intention to video-tape the focus groups as I have found it quicker and more accurate to transcribe the spoken word from a video than from just audio tape. Pseudonyms will be used to identify all people and schools that may be mentioned in the transcripts.

Potential Risks: I believe there is little or no risk because you have full and voluntary control over whether you participate in the focus group and can withdraw at any time. The only risk to the participant is a potential loss of some anonymity during the focus group meeting itself. By its very nature, focus groups require people to meet and talk face to face and many of the participants will know each other from previous meetings as middle year's teachers in the same division and will potentially meet each other again in the course of their profession. All participants must acknowledge their responsibility and agree to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what others in the group have said during the focus group sessions. If any direct quotes are used verbatim, they will only be used with the permission of the person that

spoke and they will be identified using a pseudonym. Because the participants for this research project will have met in a small focus group and become known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. It should not be possible to associate specific information in the data file with specific participants as the transcript I will use for my data analysis will have only pseudonyms.

Confidentiality: The videotapes are the primary data and will be stored at all times securely in my thesis supervisor's (Lynn Lemisko) locked filing cabinet except when they are being used by myself and/or my transcriber for transcribing and analysis purposes. After five years, they will be destroyed. When the analysis is completed and all necessary permissions have been received or not, this set of data will be destroyed. The primary set of transcripts will not have any names, only pseudonyms. The data from this study will be used in completing my master's thesis and potentially in future publications and presentations but there will not be any connection between the data and any quotes and the participant's names as the participants' names will not be present at any time.

Right to Withdraw: You may withdraw your participation at any time before, during or after the focus group meeting without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study after the focus group, your data will be deleted from the project and destroyed, if you desire it.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. You are also free to contact the researchers at the number or email provided above if you have questions later on. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Sciences Research Ethics Board on January 18, 2010. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete all of the following information and return it to Chris Clark c/o Bedford Road Collegiate, Saskatoon Public School Division through our interschool mail service or email me at clarkch@spsd.sk.ca by Friday, February 5, 2010. You will be contacted by Friday, February 12, 2010 regarding the date, time and location of the focus group. The focus groups will most likely take place during the first two weeks of March.

(Printed first and last name of Participant)

(# of years teaching experience)

(Printed school location of Participant)

(Grade level)

(Printed email address of Participant)

(Phone Number)

Time that works best for me to participate in a focus group: (circle all that apply)

4:00pm to 6:00pm 5:00pm to 7:00pm 6:00pm to 8:00pm 7:00pm to 9:00pm

Day of week that works best for me to participate in a focus group: (circle all that apply)

Mon Tues Wed Thurs Fri Sat Sun

If you circled Saturday or Sunday above, please indicate what times on those days would work best for you:

Saturday: _____

Sunday: _____

Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled: *The Challenge of Engaging Middle Years Students: Teachers' Perspectives*. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

Researcher:

Chris Clark
Masters of Education Student
Curriculum Studies
College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306 220 2368
cdc127@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor:

Lynn Lemisko
Curriculum Studies
College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306 966 7581
Fax: 306 966 7658
lynn.lemisko@usask.ca

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this study is to identify and examine the challenges that middle years' teachers face as they seek to authentically engage their students and to identify ways to overcome these challenges.

Benefits: There are potential benefits for both the participating teachers and their students and other teachers and their students. If methods of overcoming the challenges can be successfully identified and used by teachers, the potential exists for more engaged students in their classrooms.

Procedure: It is my plan to have three to five focus groups with 6 to 10 middle years teachers in each. All of the teachers will be middle years teachers which will be defined as teaching at least one class of grade 7 to 9 students in the previous year. All of the teachers are being recruited from the Saskatoon and surrounding area through contact with the various school divisions including the Saskatoon Public School Division, Saskatoon Prairie Spirit School Division, and the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School Division. Each focus group will take approximately 1.5 to 2 hours, including the meal, and will take place at Ramada Hotel in the meeting room. Supper

will be provided to the participants free of charge as a thank-you for taking part in the focus group. The decision to have more than three focus groups will be based on if the data has begun to repeat itself or if new discoveries are still being made. I will be striving for evenly mixed gender groupings in each group but trying to make the groups homogenous with regards to experience level.

My research question deals with teachers' perceptions of the challenges to implementing currently identified student engagement strategies. It is my intention to audio-tape the focus groups. Throughout the discussion, I will be also taking notes based on what the participants say so as to get as accurate a summary of the main ideas, concerns and solutions. At the end of each focus group, I will share with the participants this summary of the main ideas and invite them to make additions and deletions as they see fit. After collecting all of the data from the focus groups and transcribing the tapes, I will provide the transcription to the focus group members so they have a chance to review them and make additions and deletions as they see fit. Pseudonyms will be used to identify all people and schools that may be mentioned in the transcripts.

Potential Risks: I believe there is little or no risk because you have full and voluntary control over whether you participate in the focus group and can withdraw at any time. The only risk to the participant is a potential loss of some anonymity during the focus group meeting itself. By its very nature, focus groups require people to meet and talk face to face and many of the participants will know each other from previous meetings as middle year's teachers in the same division and will potentially meet each other again in the course of their profession. All participants must acknowledge their responsibility and agree to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what others in the group have said during the focus group sessions. If any direct quotes are used verbatim, they will only be used with the permission of the person that spoke and they will be identified using a pseudonym. Because the participants for this research project will have met in a small focus group and become known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. It should not be possible to associate specific information in the data file with specific participants as the transcript I will use for my data analysis will have only pseudonyms.

I will be audio taping the focus groups with the consent of the participants. This tape will be secured at all times and only be available to myself for transcribing and analysis and perhaps a professional transcriber. The questions that will be asked in the focus groups will not be of a personal nature and will only deal with issues that many teachers are struggling with on a day to day professional basis.

Confidentiality: The audio tapes are the primary data and will be stored at all times securely in my thesis supervisor's (Lynn Lemisko) locked filing cabinet except when they are being used by myself and/or my transcriber for transcribing and analysis purposes. After five years, they will be destroyed. When the analysis is completed and all necessary permissions have been received or not, this set of data will be destroyed. The primary set of transcripts will not have any names, only pseudonyms. The data from this study will be used in completing my master's thesis and potentially in future publications and presentations but there will not be any connection between the data and any quotes and the participant's names as the participants' names will not be present at any time.

Right to Withdraw: You may withdraw your participation at any time before, during or after the focus group meeting without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study after the focus group, your data will be deleted from the project and destroyed, if you desire it.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. You are also free to contact the researchers at the number or email provided above if you have questions later on. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Sciences Research Ethics Board on January 18, 2010. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may

withdraw this consent at any time. Furthermore, I acknowledge my responsibility and agreement to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what others in the group have said during the focus group sessions. I have signed a second copy of this consent form and kept it for my records.

(Printed name of Participant)

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Appendix C: Initial Words and Phrases From Data

What does authentic engagement look like?

- asking questions & wondering
- eyes on speaker or activity
- talking about it outside of class
- paying attention
- asking good questions
- not distracted
- not doodling
- on task
- ah ah moments
- ignore breaktime
- excitement
- smiling
- having fun
- sounds like students having a chance to talk
- questions
- awake
- sitting up
- asking questions
- at school
- haven't turned body away
- everyone is different
- teachers need to know their kids to know whose engaged
- kids all busy, loud and chaotic
- can answer questions
- fun

- physical activity
- doing stuff
- learning because they desire to know something

Educational Experiences that invite and allow for engagement

- completely relevant to own lives
- ties in history to own eyes
- ties into things they care about
- soothing a comfort
- field trip
- teacher being excited
- choice
- autonomy
- control over decisions
- real life
- get to do something
- do something and not just read or hear about it
- doing something different than the usual
- if teachers are bored, the students are bored
- teachers are passionate
- relevant
- new and expert teachers
- competition among groups
- technology
- allow for students to be an expert
- physical activity having a positive effect on body and mind
- can see a connection to their life outside of classroom

- found a book he really enjoyed
- relevance to their lives (inner city kids especially)
- go where the interest is
- inquiry
- autonomy
- problem solving
- groupwork
- fun
- get to decide on what to do
- want to be an expert
- want to contribute

Challenges to Engage Students

- time to prep for lessons
- time to learn new curriculums
- time taken up by inservices
- time taken up by school activities
- kids aren't into it
- what works one year doesn't work next year
- too many students
- need to have specialists who have a passion for a subject
- physical facility – don't have spaces for subjects
- poor technology that is slow and can't do things
- not enough money allotted for equipment and supplies
- not enough time to prep
- not enough money for equipment or photocopies
- old teachers that don't care to improve skills
- teachers content to do the minimum

- itinerant teachers who don't have time to form a relationship (this is at odds with notion of specialists)
- administration who won't let teachers do field trips
- old school teachers who have negative influence on new ones
- old teachers blocking
- disruptions taking away time
- kids life issues
- not possible to engage every day all day
- life issues
- student challenges are teacher challenges (adhd, etc)
- student challenges
- time taken by PD
- time taken by school activities
- not enough time for planning
- being held to schedules
- challenges outside of school
- irrelevancy of school
- families thinking school is irrelevant

What can be done about the challenges

- department heads, master teachers or specialists who can help teachers
- smaller class size
- allow new technology to be used easier
- I don't think we can
- I can only change myself
- need to ask teachers what they need and what is working
- computers are in other divisions classrooms
- don't shove stuff down our throat – no more bandwagons

- stop spending money on subs instead of kids
- staff schools in a balanced way
- opportunities to talk and meet as teachers as compared to lectures
- let teachers talk to each other
- networking
- allow opportunities to share units
- not just sit and be lectured at
- new teachers need the networking
- solve irrelevancy by teaching real skills
- need to be able to take time to practice skills
- need to be able to take time to do problem solving and work in groups
- day and schedules need to change

Appendix D: Data Gathered Under Themes

What does authentic engagement look like?

Major theme is hearing student voices

Minor theme is looks like paying attention, too caught up to stop, fun, things we take for granted, physically involved

Looks like he/she is paying attention

eyes on speaker or activity

paying attention

not distracted

not doodling

Student Voice is heard

asking questions

can answer questions

asking questions & wondering

asking good questions
questions
learning because they desire to know something
talking about it outside of class
sounds like students having a chance to talk

Too caught up to stop

on task
ah ah moments
ignore breaktime

Fun

excitement
smiling
fun
having fun

Things we take for granted

at school
awake
sitting up
haven't turned body away

No absolute measure

everyone is different
teachers need to know their kids to know whose engaged

kids all busy, loud and chaotic

Physically involved (very difficult to just go through the motions)

physical activity
doing stuff

Educational Experiences that invite and allow for engagement

Major Themes include relevance, autonomy and doing something

Minor themes include passion, competence and interest

Relevance

completely relevant to own lives
ties in history to own eyes
ties into things they care about
soothing a comfort
real life
relevant
relevance to their lives (inner city kids especially)
can see a connection to their life outside of classroom

Outside

field trip

Autonomy

choice
autonomy
control over decisions
autonomy
get to decide on what to do

Doing something (experiential)

get to do something

do something and not just read or hear about it
doing something different than the usual
inquiry
physical activity having a positive effect on body and mind

Passion

if teachers are bored, the students are bored
teachers are passionate
new and expert teachers
teacher being excited

Competence

want to be an expert
allow for students to be an expert
want to contribute

Interest

found a book he really enjoyed
go where the interest is

Misc

problem solving
groupwork
competition among groups
technology
fun

Challenges to Engage Students

Major Themes include time, teachers and administration, money and student lives

Minor Themes include class size, perceived irrelevancy of school

Time

- time to prep for lessons
- time to learn new curriculums
- time taken up by inservices
- time taken up by school activities
- not enough time to prep
- disruptions taking away time
- time taken by PD
- time taken by school activities
- not enough time for planning
- being held to schedules

Probably No Theme here at all

- kids aren't into it
- what works one year doesn't work next year
- not possible to engage every day all day

Class Size

- too many students

Money

- physical facility – don't have spaces for subjects
- poor technology that is slow and can't do things
- not enough money allotted for equipment and supplies
- not enough money for equipment or photocopies

Teachers and Administration

- old teachers that don't care to improve skills

teachers content to do the minimum
itinerant teachers who don't have time to form a relationship (this is at odds with
notion of specialists)
need to have specialists who have a passion for a subject
administration who won't let teachers do field trips
old school teachers who have negative influence on new ones
old teachers blocking

Student Lives

kids life issues
life issues
student challenges are teacher challenges (adhd, etc)
student challenges
challenges outside of school

Irrelevancy of School

irrelevancy of school
families thinking school is irrelevant

What can be done about the challenges

Major theme is teacher collaboration opportunities

Minor theme is staffing, class size, technology, implementation and school scheduling / time

Staffing

department heads, master teachers or specialists who can help teachers
staff schools in a balanced way

Class Size

smaller class size

Technology

allow new technology to be used easier
computers are in other divisions classrooms

Only able to change self

I don't think we can
I can only change myself

Implementation

don't shove stuff down our throat – no more bandwagons
stop spending money on subs instead of kids

Teacher Collaboration

need to ask teachers what they need and what is working
opportunities to talk and meet as teachers as compared to lectures
let teachers talk to each other
networking
allow opportunities to share units
not just sit and be lectured at
new teachers need the networking

Misc

solve irrelevancy by teaching real skills

School Scheduling and Time

need to be able to take time to practice skills
need to be able to take time to do problem solving and work in groups
day and schedules need to change

Appendix E: Excerpts From Focus Group Transcripts

Q. So with all these things, cuz you have addressed some of them. But in your discussion around the projects, the things, the things that you did, in your discussion and when you shared your educational experiences that authentically engaged. You haven't necessarily addressed all of them, as far as why? What is it, what are the challenges to doing that, what are the obstacles or barriers even, to you doing those things. Those educational experiences in other subject areas, in other, whatever?

From the elementary perspective, we are teaching too many subjects. So I think that is our biggest barrier. Because we are not specialized, in the sciences, or language arts. We are expected to be generalists and teach everything. So it is not fall back on us, but it is limiting us to what we can do. We can't do our full potential in every subject every day, because there is just too much prep work to do that. Even with 250 minutes of prep time that we are going to be getting as elementary teachers, it is not enough to do what you need to do. I think that is part of our draw back, in that we are expected to do too much with too little because we are not given the money to do anything basically in language arts. Everyday you are limited as to the amount of photocopying you can do. Our whole math budget for manipulatives is \$1000 dollars per 10 class rooms. That is \$100. If you photocopy anything to do with the grade 8's and you are done in the first 2-3 units of math. You are shut down and you can't have any more photocopying because I have exceeded my budget. And it is because the new math is saying I have to do this, this and this. So from my perspective it is working too much as elementary school teachers.

It is so different from school to school too. You have 1 school where you have the paper nazi who will take up all your paper and you have 800 sheets for the year and here you go and once you are out you are out. And then you go to the next school and you have woooo hooo you don't even have a number, so here we go. There is no uniformity between schools. We borrow from one budget line to pay for another and that is a big problem in and of itself. It is a little off topic, but since you brought up the photocopying thing. I know I have been in a variety of different buildings and it is different from building to building and I do think it affects instruction in terms of what you are doing.

The other is age of teachers. I have a lot of teachers at our school that technology scares them. They refuse to do anything with it because A I am going to retire soon and I don't need to learn how to do it, if I can get my email off my account, then that is enough for me. So engaging kids when it comes to different types of activities, they are not going to do it, because it is out of their comfort zone. All that is happening now, I go back to University and I think about 19-20 years ago when I was in education. They didn't prepare me for the things of today. We are expected to be bigger and better with everything we do, but yet we don't have the training. Everything I do on the computer I do myself. Its not from going to the inservices, because the inservices that are provided for us as teachers don't help us to be better classroom teachers they just show us one little tiny snap shot of what we need to learn for a specific idea and then we are off to something else.

I think I just want to tie into _____, as he had made the comment about 'I hate sucking'.

I do.

I agree with you, I am in an interesting position where I teach and I am admin, and I am always running and sometimes I am frustrated because I have all these rules and I am still a teacher first. I want to be good in the classroom. I think seeing other teachers over the years that are very content doing the minimum. You know, kids are never engaged, but guess what, I am getting my marking done I am in and out, and you know, thanks for coming out. And there are people out there, you look at their classroom and I think, these kids are dying, They want to be engaged. They want it so badly and the teacher is sucking the life out of them. But, what are you going to do. Because there are people that say, ah, whatever, I'm good. I'm 5 years away from retirement, I have done things this way, so why change. You know, and it is frustrating. It is really hard because those kids really need it. Middle years are crucial. I just find there is such a changing for the kids and of course the hormones and I mean, the boys are girls and, it takes a special person really, to teach middle years and I have heard that many many times.

Usually someone hard of smell.

Yeah, yeah, or who can't smell at all. But you know, it is frustrating. Like you, there are many who say I want to be a better teacher I want to be there with them. But there are some, that just don't, and in elementary school, we teach it all.

And that is the other piece of the puzzle. Money, time, and then the relationship, and that is what I worry about if we have all these teachers who, itinerant teachers, and all these different people coming in. The relationship that I have with my students, even though I can't or don't have the time to devote, maybe I won't do it, not that I can't do it, but to get into those kinds of science lessons. But if somebody is coming in to do this, and somebody is coming in to do that, and somebody is coming in to do this, I know the kids that I teach, we have great itinerant teachers who are awesome, but the kids are buying into it at half an hour a day. They don't have the time to develop that relationship, so, I don't know.

I think that for some schools. The challenge to overcome is admin. We are lucky, it sounds like that at our school we have an admin who allows us to go out and try new things. Where as I know, at other schools talking to teachers, admin won't let you go out of your classroom to film or out into the parks, or do what field trips are designed to do. So that challenge is having an administration that allows you to step outside of the classroom walls. And another one, that someone touched on is the old teachers, the 'old school' teachers. I would call it, that they kind of have an influence on the younger teachers who maybe do have these exciting, the middle school teachers who have these exciting ideas. I know that coming out being a new teacher I wanted to try these new things and a lot of them were like, 'Na, that won't work'. That was a big challenge, and that they shot down my ideas right away, and other younger teachers. So that might be another challenge is having some of the older teachers who suck the life out of the students and some of the new teachers trying things and new ideas.

From the admin point of view, I agree with you 110%. I know that myself, my partner there, we embrace that, we love that. And we always say to the staff. At the end of the day, what are your kids learning? Because that has to come first, student learning needs to be priority number one. So how are they learning and what are you doing to help them learn. And are they engaged? Are they enjoying it? Or are they falling asleep in the classroom as you walk by. I agree, there are other admin people out there that are, no, they would prefer to have it certain ways and that is fine. I have been very fortunate to work with admin partners that have been very, you forgive later. If that student, those students need to come first. That student learning, that engagement and all that kind of stuff, you have to be supportive of your teachers. You want to do it, great. You want to find money, well then lets do it. Lets, make it work and I don't know what I would do if I started working with somebody who is not like that, because I am very different than that, so it may be a challenge, but you know.