Students’ Perspectives Regarding Their Emotional Engagement in Middle School Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THEIR EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Brendan McCormick, Ed.D.
Curriculum and Instruction
Northern Illinois University, 2019
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This dissertation examines emotional engagement as a vital component of creating optimal learning environments for mid-adolescent students. Through a qualitative research design, seventh and eighth grade student volunteers from Cornfield Middle School shared perspectives on their emotional engagement experiences in middle school learning environments. Thirty-four students participated in three rounds of data collection—an open-ended survey about flow experiences, a homogeneous focus group discussion, and a follow-up survey. The results from each data collection procedure were coded and arranged into themes of positive and negative emotions experienced in certain academic contexts.

The results show that the CFMS students experienced a range of both positive and negative emotions in the context of various classes, learning activities, and other academic settings. Specific descriptions of these emotions and contexts varied by individual student and by focus group discussion. Positive emotions and context themes included positive interactions with peers and teachers, increased student autonomy, active, authentic, and creative schoolwork, and real world connections. Negative emotions and context themes included boredom in academic settings, stress and anxiety from schoolwork, negative peer and teacher interaction, negativity towards rules and requirements, and general negativity or apathy towards school. Overall, the
study reveals not only the particularly vital role emotional engagement has in creating optimal learning environments for this age group, but also how precarious this endeavor can be because of mid-adolescents’ developmental characteristics. There are implications for administrators, teacher preparation programs, future researchers, and even current students, but the strongest implications are for teachers of mid-adolescents, who should make students’ emotional engagement a key factor of their instructional design decision making.
STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THEIR EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN
MIDDLE SCHOOL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

BY
BRENDAN MCCORMICK
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Finally, I thank my wife Jill, for her unwavering love and companionship. I simply could not have done this without you.
DEDICATION

To my sons, Sam, Jack, and Ben.

May you find interest, challenge, and enjoyment in what you do.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Two classrooms sit next to each other in a middle school building. The same subject is taught in each, but the quality of the learning experience offered to students is much different. In the first, the majority of instruction is based on worksheets, direct instruction from the teacher, lectures, and note taking. The tone is business-like, with strict adherence to particular behavioral requirements. In the second, instructional activities are varied each day and based on interaction and active application through discussion, group work, writing, and project-based learning. In both classrooms the teachers care about their students and feel they are teaching the “right way.” And yet, the feeling students have in each room is entirely different. In the first, some students are bored with the repetition and lack of autonomy. Others feel isolated, anxious, or stifled by the feel of the room. In the second, students enjoy the work, feel challenged to do their best, and thrive on peer and teacher support. Often, they are surprised by the bell at the end of the period and feel like time has flown by. They exit and continue discussing class in the hallway.

In “My Pedagogic Creed” from 1897, John Dewey wrote, “I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demand of the social situations in which he finds himself.” This “stimulation of the child’s powers” has come to be known as engagement, defined by Shernoff (2013) as “the heightened, simultaneous experience of concentration, interest, and enjoyment in the task at hand” (p. 12). Engagement is a vital component of the learning process, since it is only possible to learn when energy and attention are willingly invested in response towards something in the surrounding environment (Marks, 2000), and when such investment stimulates a person to push towards skill levels that lie just beyond their individual competencies (Vygotsky, 1978).
While the importance of engagement to the learning process is agreed upon (Newmann, 1992), and researchers have used a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches to show its significance, the academic literature on engagement remains broad and scattered (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Shernoff, 2013). The term “engagement” itself has been used to define many separate processes that overlap with motivation, self-efficacy, and other learner centered foci. This leads to a range of terminology and research designs that can confuse as much as they clarify (Fredricks, et al.). Fredricks et al. created some consensus in the literature by conceptualizing engagement as a multidimensional construct with three essential interactive components—cognitive, behavioral and emotional—which they assert must be studied together as a “meta” construct. The authors further indicated, however, that emotional engagement may actually be a prerequisite for the others, stating it “likely…leads to increases in behavioral and cognitive engagement, both of which mediate subsequent achievement” (p. 83, 2004). Indeed, Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) conceptualize optimal learning environments as settings that offer “academic intensity” combined with a “positive emotional response” (p. 136). Marks’ (2000) argument is quite similar—that engagement is cultivated through authentic instruction in an emotionally positive, socially supportive environment. These studies assert the leading role of emotional engagement in academics and justify why it must become the focus of further research. They each speak to the importance of positive emotions as prerequisites for attention, yet rarely is the term “emotional engagement” used explicitly.

Recently, Shernoff (2013) applied Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory (1990) of *optimal experiences* to academic engagement studies. Shernoff centers the discussion of engagement on *optimal learning environments* for students, defined as academic settings “with empirical evidence of engaging youth” (p. 13). In doing so, he synthesizes several important elements. He
identifies flow theory as a framework for studying “optimal state[s] of cognitive and emotional engagement” (p.12). He states simply, “If schools are not created as places where individuals can regularly experience flow, it also follows that they are not set up to regularly experience learning” (p. 12). Shernoff emphasizes that experiencing flow not only positively impacts learning, but the “promotion of psychological well-being” (p. 13) as well. This asserts that optimal engagement has social and emotional benefits for students, as well as academic.

Fostering emotional engagement through optimal learning experiences in school is especially important for adolescents, defined by Muuss (1968) as the age range from “approximately twelve or thirteen to the early twenties” in which children move from “dependent childhood to self-sufficient adulthood,” and must make “new adjustments” to their behavior to navigate this “marginal” stage of development (p. 4). Adolescent students crave fulfillment and belonging at a time when many aspects of life have become challenging and chaotic (Eccles, et al. 1993). What is worth doing and paying attention to—or what engages them—has become especially important to their senses of self. Furthermore, positive development into adulthood depends largely on whether or not individuals discover optimally engaging activities while they are teenagers (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Too often, however, teenagers are blamed for their lack of engagement as if their difficulties paying attention at school are their fault and not the fault of adult professionals charged with optimizing the classroom settings for the students they serve (Shernoff, 2013). Rather than blame adolescents, educators ought to listen to what these students have to say about their emotional engagement experiences at school. Such feedback from this age group has been underreported, and could provide crucial guidance for educators towards providing learning experiences which are, in Dewey’s words, “truly educative” (1897).
Problem Statement and Purpose of Study

Since schoolwork is demotivating by nature (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), teachers must ensure it is as authentic, relevant (Newmann, 1992), and enjoyable as possible (Shernoff, 2013). However, despite its essential importance, fostering positive engagement in schools remains the exception to the rule (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). Many studies of various designs have yielded useful data on the effects of particular academic activities and settings on student engagement (Johnson, 2008; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Shernoff, et al., 2003; Shernoff, Tonks, & Anderson, 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2011), and consistently show that hands-on, active lessons such as lab work and projects, and interaction such as cooperative learning, discussions, and group inquiry lead to increased engagement and positive affect in the classroom. And yet, research shows that these types of activities are used sparingly, if at all, and that a majority of class time is devoted to adult-led, directive teaching such as lecture or note-taking (Shernoff, et al., 2003). Furthermore, positive academic emotions are shown to be antecedents for subsequent achievement (Pekrun, 2006), and relationships between learning environments and emotions are situation specific (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007; Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, & Hall, 2006) and reciprocal to one another (Pekrun, Goetz, & Titz, 2002).

The effects of disengagement are pronounced and lead to compounding negative consequences for adolescent students as they progress through their schooling, such as boredom, disaffection, and dropping out completely (Connor & Pope, 2013; Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks, et al., 2004; Marks, 2000; Newmann, 1992; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). Pronounced disengagement is also shown to be a predictor of delinquency and substance abuse (Henry,
A mismatch of improperly designed, disengaging instructional strategies can have adverse effects for adolescents regarding not only their engagement in academics (Wang & Eccles, 2011), but also other areas of life such as mental health and overall happiness (Eccles, et al. 1993; Wang & Peck, 2013). Longitudinal trends show that both engagement levels and overall happiness tend to decrease as adolescents progress through middle and high school (Gallup, 2016; Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Marks, 2000). Such a trend is clearly undesirable, and yet its slope shows no signs of changing.

Reversing the disengagement trend is just one prevailing reason to welcome new research into optimal engagement. Engagement happens in the context of any number of life experiences, and students inevitably compare the school experience to experiences outside of school and begin to feel as though particular academic contexts are more engaging than others. Allowing adolescent students to voice these engagement opinions may enlighten professional educators on the types of schoolwork and academic settings that are the most engaging, and those that are disengaging. Per flow theory, engagement experiences are optimized when concentration is combined with ideal emotional conditions and such emotional conditions are especially important for adolescent students. Furthermore, there is currently a lack of literature on optimal engagement specifically for middle school students—or mid-adolescents. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore mid-adolescent students’ perspectives regarding their emotional engagement experiences in middle school learning environments.
Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

How do mid-adolescent student participants at Cornfield Middle School describe the academic contexts for their emotional engagement experiences?

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study was based on three main theories. Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) provided the foundation for how optimal learning experiences (Shernoff, 2013) were defined, while stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al, 1993) provided the rationale for the amplified importance of optimal learning experiences for adolescent students. Control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006) explained the ways in which students judge their work based on its controllability and importance, and how these emotional assessments affect their achievement and well-being. These theories are linked by their shared emphasis on positive emotional responses as key components of adolescent engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the intertwining nature of separate components from each of these three theories, creating a feedback loop in which positive emotions and optimal engagement each support one another, which in turn positively benefits psychological well-being. This cycle then leads to further increases of positive emotions and engagement and is the basis for emotional engagement for mid-adolescent students.
Flow Theory

Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) is defined as a state of being in which a person becomes completely immersed in a creative, athletic, educational, or occupational endeavor, purely for enjoyment of the pursuit of mastery, and at such a degree of “intense concentration and absorption” (Shernoff, Abdi, Anderson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 212) that there is “no psychic energy left over for distractions” (p. 212), such as hunger. It is a “merging of awareness
with action, a feeling of control, loss of self-consciousness, and a contraction of the normal sense of time—i.e. time seems to fly” (p. 212). This level of intense, active immersion is vital for learning and positive human development, since those who regularly experience flow are intrinsically motivated to pursue mastery and further challenge, and find enjoyment in these pursuits. While providing the basis for Shernoff’s model of optimal learning environments (2013), Fredricks, et al. (2004) also assert that flow theory offers a set of qualitative distinctions towards defining high emotional engagement. Framing research around this optimal form of emotional engagement offers a way to inquire about enjoyable pursuits, in and out of school, to show how school work compares as an engaging or disengaging experience.

**Stage Environment Fit Theory**

Adolescent students require learning environments that specifically match their social-emotional needs. If such environments are not fully optimized, a mismatch results between students’ development and what is required from their educational settings. This mismatch can further exacerbate the personal and social issues with which adolescents inherently struggle, creating a negative domino effect that can even extend to life outside of school (Eccles et al., 1993). This phenomenon has been studied under the Stage-Environment Fit Theory.

This theory holds particular importance for middle school students, as they face a more condensed period of transitions between buildings and classroom environments depending on the organization of the district—from elementary to middle or junior high, and rather quickly from middle or junior high to high school. Simply put, an academic social setting must be designed to fit the psychological needs of adolescents, which includes inspiring positive affect during a stage of life in which this can be quite challenging (Eccles, et al., 1993).
Control Value Theory

The third and final component of the theoretical framework for this study was control value theory. Given that flow represents optimal engagement in which challenge and enjoyment occur simultaneously, and that stage-environment fit shows that optimal engagement is only possible for adolescents within particularly positive environmental conditions, students’ perceptions of their academic work are a final determining factor of creating optimal learning environments. Pekrun (2006) and others have written that students’ appraisals of their assignments must inspire belief that the outcome of their work is valued and within their control. In other words, they must feel that they have the ability to do well, and doing well must be important to them. Positive appraisals of control and value are likely to lead to positive emotional responses, while work that is too difficult or meaningless likely leads to stress or boredom.

Simply, teachers must properly construct academic environments and activities to foster positive emotions. If teachers are able to foster nurturing environments and offer an appropriate level of challenging work that is controllable and valued, students are more likely to be engaged at school and may even find flow through academic activities. A bi-directional relationship is clear in which engagement is both nurtured by and leads to further positive emotions (see fig. 1). Beyond the three core theories, this framework also draws influence from Lewis et al. (2011), who have indicated bi-directional relationships between positive affect, emotional engagement, and life satisfaction. Furthermore, Fredrickson (2001) has shown the importance of environments that inspire positive affect, and how positive emotions lead to further psychological well-being.
Finally, the cycle includes Newmann’s (1992) authentic instruction as a vital component of academic engagement and students’ emotional responses to their schoolwork.

For example, a student sitting at her desk surveys her classroom and decides whether or not she feels comfortable and can relate to her classmates and instructor. She judges the work before her and ascertains whether she will perform well and if it will be worth her effort. Positive appraisals of both contexts become prerequisites for her engagement. If she indeed is engaged through the work, this will continue to inspire positive feelings and her engagement will remain high and perhaps intensify. An increase in positive emotions, factors in the optimal learning environment, and overall psychological well-being likely lead to further positive emotions and increased engagement, and the cycle flourishes. A more detailed explanation of this theoretical framework will follow in Chapter 2.

Significance of Study

This study was significant for a number of reasons. Very rarely are students, especially mid-adolescent students, given the chance to evaluate and share perspectives on their educational experiences without numerical surveys or other psychometrics used as a filter (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). If engagement must be present in order for high levels of learning to occur, and if flow provides a model for high emotional and cognitive engagement, then those in the position of implementing educational policies and pedagogy may benefit by understanding the characteristics of academic work and settings that engaged these middle school students at the highest level. Qualitative, emotional enjoyment of school is necessary to inspire continued effort towards mastering skills and content (Lewis et al., 2011). Such practices should be a priority for mid-adolescent educators since the middle school philosophy places students’ social emotional
needs on equal footing with their academic progress. Further transforming schools into places where activities and settings facilitate flow while simultaneously achieving learning objectives would be a triumph for holistic educational practices.

Recent accountability mandates from No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top and Common Core have shifted teaching practices towards data driven decision making often dependent on achieving quantifiable outcomes. While empirical decision making is certainly beneficial, numbers do not completely capture what defines a quality teacher—what Tyler (2013) describes as the essential talent of “controlling the learning experience…through manipulation of the environment in such a way as to set up stimulating situations…that will evoke the kind of behavior desired” (p. 64). Achievement data may be inaccurate and unreliable without first fostering the proper social and emotional environment to experientially engage students in their academic work. In fact, a focus on high stakes achievement can be harmful if it comes at the expense of students’ psychological well-being.

Researchers have suggested that further qualitative studies of engagement are needed and that emotional engagement may be a prerequisite for the other constructs of engagement to occur (Fredricks et al., 2004). A gap remains in the research in which mid-adolescent students are afforded the opportunity to give nuanced explanations of particular classes and assignments that emotionally engage them at the highest level. It is one thing to quantify levels of engagement, but another to ask why or how those levels occur in the first place, and what optimal school experiences feel like for middle school students.
Definitions

The following terms and definitions will be useful towards understanding this study:

**Academic context**- The situations and circumstance in schools defined by a combination of interaction with peers and teachers, pedagogical choices, school work, and classroom settings.

**Academic engagement**- “The student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newmann, 1992, p. 12).

**Academic experience**- Any activity, experience, or assignment that is related specifically to schooling or conducted in a classroom setting, for the purpose of mastering skills, learning content, or providing an educational experience.

**Emotional engagement**- “Encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). Concepts of relatedness, identity, values, and intrinsic motivation intersect to form students’ “affective reactions in the classroom, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety” (p. 63).

**Engagement**- In addition to Shernoff (2013), Marks (2000) offers, “Engagement is a growth-producing activity through which the individual allocates attention in active response to the environment” (p. 155). This is included as support for Shernoff’s definition because of Marks’s emphasis on the environment as a mediating factor on attention, and because of her work in stage-environment fit.
Mid-adolescent- Students in the midst of adolescence, attending middle school, between 12 and 15 years old. In this study, this age range is represented by 7th and 8th grade students.

Optimal learning environment- “Educational or learning environments with empirical evidence of engaging youth” (Shernoff, 2013, p. 13).

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative methodology. A sample of 7th and 8th grade participants was drawn from Cornfield Middle School. Data were collected initially through open-ended survey questions based on Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997). These survey responses guided the middle school students into seven homogeneous focus groups. Focus group meetings were guided by a set of core questions and students were allowed to volunteer their perspectives. Transcriptions of these meetings were coded for particular combinations of positive and negative emotions in certain academic contexts. These combinations were distilled into themes and arranged in the order of which themes occurred the most over the course of the focus group discussions.

Delimitations

This study was made more manageable by focusing on one middle school as a case study for emotionally engaging or disengaging school experiences. The very nature of the selection methodology limited the participant sample size since it was based on student volunteers from two grade levels obtaining parent permission. The data collection for the study was confined to the course of one school year.
Organization of the Study

This study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 states the problem and purpose, introduces the theoretical framework, presents the research questions and methodology, and explains the significance of the study. Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature on general studies of adolescents and engagement, as well as more specific studies of Flow Theory, Stage-Environment Fit Theory, and Control Value theory as they pertain to the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 explains and justifies the methodology chosen to conduct this study. Chapter 4 reviews and discusses the findings from the middle school students’ survey responses. Chapters 5 and 6 review the findings from the focus group discussions as a split between positive and negative emotions and their accompanying academic contexts. Chapter 7 concludes the study with a discussion of the implications for this study of mid-adolescent students’ perspectives on emotional engagement and its importance in academic settings.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Human beings choose to invest their attention in particular activities, but understanding the factors which cause certain activities to be more worthwhile and engaging than others is deceptively complex. There is no universal, standardized way to determine how engaged a person is since it is largely based on the emotional quality of an experience—i.e. what we feel like doing within a particular setting at a particular time, and how we feel while we are doing it. This means that the literature on engagement is still ongoing and evolving, with researchers studying it in various ways. Fredricks et al. (2004) provided an often-cited overview of engagement research, while Shernoff (2013) and others have used flow theory to show the characteristics of optimal learning environments that emotionally engage students. However, further qualitative research into optimal learning environments and emotional engagement is necessary, and there is a concerning lack of qualitative emotional engagement literature on the middle school age group. Therefore, this literature review presents several areas of research and theory as the foundation for this study of emotional engagement experiences for mid-adolescent students.
Guiding Questions

The following questions guided the research process for this literature review:

1. How has academic engagement been defined and studied?
2. What is the importance of emotional engagement as a separate engagement construct?
3. How does the adolescent experience influence emotional engagement?
4. What are the characteristics of optimal learning environments, and how have they been studied?
5. What is the influence of emotional engagement on creating optimal learning environments for adolescents?

Engagement: The Basics

Engagement is a universal human experience, one that has some observable characteristics, but is really experienced subjectively and internally across a “continuum from less to more” (Newmann, 1992, p. 13) depending on the individual and present activity. Marks (2000) asserts that a person’s ability to engage with an activity depends on a combination of individual perspective with environmental factors. She elaborates,

Children learn by paying attention to other people, events, and aspects of their surroundings that they find meaningful and enjoyable. Through the process of socialization, they learn to concentrate on tasks. Cognitively challenging tasks and verbal interactions around these activities promote their intellectual development. How children and adolescents choose to allocate their attention depends on the interaction of several factors: their natural inclinations, the satisfaction they have derived from paying attention in other settings, and the value they attach to the activity based on its relevance to a future they anticipate (p. 155).

She continues that engagement “is an important facet of students’ school experience because of its logical relationship to achievement and to optimal human development” (p. 155). Vygotsky (1978) also asserts that development and learning occur through active participation in social,
cognitively challenging environments. Actively engaging with one’s environment is not only a vital component of the learning process, but a fundamental aspect of the human experience.

According to Marks, basic engagement suggests “both affective and behavioral participation in the learning experience” (p. 155), meaning that a person’s emotions and actions are directly linked with the task at hand. This combination of action and emotion is the very essence of engagement, as Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) write that the highest levels of engagement are reached “when concentration, enjoyment, and interest [are] simultaneously elevated” (p. 133). Optimal engagement, or flow, occurs when a person’s skill levels are perfectly in balance with a perceived challenge. This heightened state leads “to higher quality learning experiences in terms of perceived engagement, intrinsic motivation, mood, and self-esteem” (p. 134). Connor and Pope (2013) positively link high-engagement in students to school achievement, understanding new material and acquiring new skills, “buffering youth from risk behaviors and unhealthy outcomes,” staving off depression, and promoting well-being and life satisfaction (p. 2-3). The authors conclude,

Fully engaged students achieve significantly higher GPAs, take significantly more advanced courses, cheat significantly less, and experience significantly less academic worry and significantly fewer internalizing, externalizing, and physical symptoms of stress than students in the two other engagement profiles (p. 9).

Shernoff and Hoogstra (2001) have connected engagement in high school math and science classes with continuing motivation for such classes in college, though research also indicates that students tend to be more engaged in non-academic courses such as art and music (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Shernoff, Knauth, & Makris, 2001).

Yair (2000) writes that a lack of engagement, or disengagement, is a form of alienation from instruction. Without engagement, students complete their work without caring about it, and
may disconnect from school completely (Newmann, 1992). The causes of disengagement are as varied as those for engagement—academic work that is not appropriately leveled, “social problems” with “teachers and/or peers” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005, p. 317), or a range of other possibilities. Disengagement has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes: “low levels of academic achievement, high levels of student boredom and disaffection, and high dropout rates in urban areas” and a view of “schooling as boring or as a mere grade game, in which [students] try to get by with as little effort as possible” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 59-60); or “dispirited teachers and disengaged students ‘putting in their time’ while negotiating a sprawling and fragmented curriculum” (Marks, p. 155-156).

Connor and Pope (2013) note that even in many high-performing schools, “students go through school on auto-pilot, moving from one assignment to the other with little time for reflection,” and that despite their perceived success, “students privately concede that they do not actually learn or retain the intended material” (p. 3). Furthermore, Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012) show that disengagement warning indexes based on low achievement in 8th and 9th grade are predictors for not only a high probability of dropping out of school, but also for adolescent delinquent or criminal behavior and substance abuse.

Despite the benefits of optimal engagement and the significant consequences of disengagement, low levels of engagement remain the norm in schools across the country. Yazzie-Mintz (2006) writes in a summary of the results of a nationwide engagement survey, “Two out of three students are bored in class in high school at least every day; [and] 17%...are bored in every class in high school. Only 2% of the students surveyed have never been bored in high school” (p. 5). Boredom was attributed to material that was not interesting, relevant, or challenging enough, and not enough interaction between students and teachers. When asked,
“Why do you go to school?” 73% responded, “Because I want to get a degree and go to college” (p. 5). Yazzie-Mintz indicates, “Nearly as many students complemented this academic purpose for being in school with a socially-based response, ‘Because of my peers/friends.’ More than half of the students stated a legal reason as well, ‘Because it’s the law’” (p. 4). Roughly a third of respondents reported that they go to school to learn and because they enjoy being there.

A recent Gallup (2016) student poll on engagement included 900,000 total participants from 5th through 12th grade. Based on a Likert-type scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, the results of the survey empirically support trends indicated by Marks, Csikszentmihalyi, and others that overall engagement decreases as students move from elementary school into middle and high school. The items with the lowest average scores are, “At this school, I get to do what I do best every day” (3.57), and “I have fun at school” (3.50) (p. 2). Overall engagement scores are lowest for 11th grade participants (3.59) and highest for 5th grade students (4.30), with middle school scores dropping to 3.81 by 8th grade. Clearly, the decline of engagement begins in middle school, indicating possible correlations between disengagement, age group characteristics, and school settings. However, engagement for middle school students has not been studied nearly as much as for high school and college students even though the beginning of disengagement is traced to the younger age group.

This decline in engagement through middle and high school cannot be blamed on students, however. It falls on educators to create learning environments that foster engagement. Newmann (1992) writes,

Meaningful learning cannot be delivered to high school students like pizza to be consumed or videos to be observed…Students cannot be expected to achieve unless they concentrate, work, and invest themselves in the mastery of school tasks. This is the sense in which student engagement is critical to educational success; to enhance achievement, one must first learn how to engage students (p. 3).
Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) offer that students tend to be more engaged when they are active, whether individually or with a group, than they are “while listening to a lecture or watching TV or a video” (p. 134), but that “opportunities for action and to demonstrate their skills...[are] rare” (p. 134). Connor and Pope (2013) write that teachers can promote engagement through providing clear goals and immediate feedback, promoting student voice, choice, and opportunities for involvement, and fostering positive, caring relationships with students.

Newmann contends that in addition to nurturing students and respecting them as members of the school community, instructors must provide “authentic work” to “maximize student engagement” (p. 23). Authentic work is “considered meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one’s effort, in contrast to those considered nonsensical, useless, contrived, trivial, and therefore unworthy of effort” (p. 23). Students are more likely to value assignments that meet standards of extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interest, ownership, enjoyment, and real world connections (p. 23). Such work is more likely to lead to increased classroom participation and desire for challenge. Tyler’s statement that, “the means of education are educational experiences that are had by the learner” (2013, p. 63) emphasizes the vital role teachers have in establishing “situations that have so many facets that they are likely to evoke the desired experience from all the students” (p. 65). In other words, engaging students at a high level cannot occur without teachers who make it the utmost concern of their pedagogy.

Though it may seem as obvious as simply selecting from a list of proven instructional methods, Yair (2000) writes that fostering engagement “is indeed an achievement, since students are constantly affected and seduced by out-of-classroom contexts” (p. 248). Understanding how engagement occurs for individuals and how teachers may promote it is indeed complex, and is
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further complicated by its subjectivity, susceptibility to the environment, and multidimensional
nature. Fredricks, et al. (2004) also observe that organizing research studies under an
“engagement” label “is potentially problematic; it can result in a proliferation of constructs,
definitions, and measures of concepts that differ slightly, thereby doing little to improve
conceptual clarity” (p. 60). Though there is agreement on its general definition and importance,
the literature is cluttered with a myriad of seemingly valid perspectives that often seek to clarify
similar phenomena or processes but with different terminology. There are connections and
overlaps between motivation, achievement, and engagement, yet they are not as direct, clear, or
universal as might be expected (Newmann, 1992). Because of this range of connections to other
phenomenon, its fluid nature along a continuum of various life experiences, and an array of
pedagogical philosophies on how to best cultivate it in schools, engagement has come to mean
many things to many people.

Recently, engagement has been conceptualized as a multifaceted construct with three
separate yet interactive components—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—as supported by
Fredricks, et al. (2004). *Behavioral engagement* itself is characterized by three observable
actions—“positive conduct,” “involvement in learning and academic tasks,” and “participation in
school-related activities” (p. 60). It “is considered crucial for achieving positive academic
outcomes and preventing dropping out” (p. 60). *Emotional engagement* “encompasses positive
and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create
ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work” (p. 60). Concepts of relatedness,
identity, values, and intrinsic motivation intersect to form students’ “affective reactions in the
classroom, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety” (p. 63). Finally,
*cognitive engagement* “draws on the idea of investment” and “incorporates thoughtfulness and
willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (p. 60) through self-regulated strategizing and problem solving.

The three engagement constructs can be succinctly simplified as how students “behave, feel, and think” (p. 60) while in school, but it is the unity of the three into one “‘meta’ construct” (p. 60) and an agreement that “that the term [engagement] should be reserved specifically for work where multiple components are present” (p. 60) that have moved the research into a degree of coherence. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, and Paris, (2005) argue that one engagement construct should not be studied independently from the others because doing so “dichotomizes students’ behavior, emotion, and cognition, whereas in reality these factors are dynamically embedded within a single individual and are not isolated processes” (p. 306). Despite this recommendation though, the authors also assert that emotional engagement may take precedence by mediating subsequent behaviors and thought processes (Fredricks et al., 2004). This suggests that beyond how students think and behave at school, how they feel may be even more important. Additionally, emotions are individualized, complex, and do not always predictably align with behaviors. Scaled items for quantifying emotions often rely on simple items, such as “I like being at school,” or, “My classroom is a fun place to be” (Fredricks, et al., 2005, p. 319). This simplicity is useful in that it is easy to understand for younger students, but the items may not reveal nuance regarding why students feel the way they do in school or how emotions drive their engagement.

Finn (1989; Finn & Voekel, 1993) is often cited in the literature for his work on the cyclical nature of behavioral and emotional engagement. Tackling the issue of rising absenteeism, truancy, dropout, and delinquency rates for disengaged, at-risk students, he posits that students who identify with their schools are more likely to stay in school and achieve. This
relatedness is fostered through participation in classroom and extra-curricular activities. Students who participate are more likely to be academically successful, which in turn inspires a more positive response to the school environment. Such positive affect leads to identification, which fosters engagement. A positive school environment kindles a desire for participation amongst the students. Newmann (1992) supports Finn’s work in the participation-identification model, but interchanges “identity” with “school membership” (p. 19). Both authors reiterate the necessity of a nurturing school climate for engagement to thrive.

Clearly, conceptions of engagement are still ongoing and evolving. However, Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) make plain an important distinction, in slight contrast to Fredricks et al. (2005)—that increased cognition and desirable academic behaviors follow from ideal emotional conditions: a nurturing environment that promotes social relatedness, and academic work designed to inspire enjoyment and challenge simultaneously. Cultivating an emotionally engaging learning environment is especially important for adolescent students, and an inability to consistently accomplish this systemically may explain why middle school is the genesis of disengagement for many students.

Stage-Environment Fit

An understanding of emotionally engaging learning environments for adolescent students requires reviewing aspects of academic settings that meet, or do not meet, adolescent needs. As Fredrickson argues (2001), positive affect must be a feature of an environment in order for individuals to engage with it. She further explains the fundamentals of an individual’s social-emotional interaction with his or her environment:
This link between positive affect and activity engagement provides an explanation for the often-documented positivity offset, or the tendency for individuals to experience mild positive affect frequently, even in neutral contexts. Without such an offset, individuals most often would be unmotivated to engage with their environments. Yet with such an offset, individuals exhibit the adaptive bias to approach and explore novel objects, people, or situations (p. 219).

In other words, we engage with our environments to further our improvement as biological beings, so we strive for positive affect even in neutral situations. However, not all age groups consistently maintain this “positivity offset” in relationship to their environments, especially when the environments offered to them may be the very opposite of what they require. For adolescents, internal and social struggles are compounded by the negative environments they encounter far too often at school. Eccles et al. (1993) write that for some students, “the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral,…a spiral that leads some adolescents to academic failure and school dropout” (p. 90). The authors note that this downward spiral often starts when children transition from elementary to middle school or junior high, then continues for many students into high school. They theorize that a drastic shift in educational environment to one with “a greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline,” (p. 93) “less personal and positive teacher-student relationships,” (p. 93) and “an increase in practices such as whole-class task organization, between-classroom ability grouping, and public evaluation of the correctness of work” (p. 93) may be to blame for students’ emotional digression. Such a combination is simply a mismatch of individuals and environment. The authors argue,

Individuals are not likely to do well, or be motivated, if they are in social environments that do not meet their psychological needs. If the social environments in the typical junior high school do not fit with the psychological needs of adolescents, then person-environment fit theory predicts a decline in motivation, interest, performance, and behavior as they move into this environment (p. 91).
Stage-Environment Theory contends that for this especially complicated age group, synchronicity between social-emotional needs and a developmentally appropriate learning environment is a necessity. This links with emotional engagement studies, since a mismatched school environment is likely to hinder relatedness, identification with school, and positive affect. A negative school environment simply compounds factors outside of school that begin to distract adolescents from their school work, as Newmann (1992) also explains:

The social roles and developmental dynamics of adolescence pose roadblocks to engagement in academic work, as other concerns and activities occupy students’ attention and energy. Interpersonal issues with parents and peers usually take on added significance, as do sexual relations… In effect, teachers must compete for students’ attention with parents, siblings, boyfriends, girlfriends, bosses, coaches, salespeople, media figures, and a host of others who touch adolescents’ lives. (p. 15)

Though this expanding worldview may offer increased learning opportunities for students and teachers, adolescents frequently confront school environments that “emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment,” (Eccles et al., p. 94) “decrease decision making and choice at a time when the desire for control is growing,” (p. 94) “emphasize lower level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher level strategies is increasing,” (p. 94) and “disrupt social relationships” (p. 94) at a time when forming positive relationships with peers and trustworthy adults outside of the home becomes especially important.

Wang and Eccles (2011) applied stage-environment fit theory to a longitudinal study of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Data were collected from a diverse sample of public school students in three rounds using the same participants during grades 7, 9, and 11. Measures consisted of a combination of students’ GPAs, engagement surveys, and self-reported narrative questions to analyze school participation and belonging, and self-regulated learning. Similar to other studies, they found that engagement levels in all three components declined as
the students increased grade levels, showing the “increasing misfit between the youth’s stage of
development and the opportunities provided in their school environments” (p. 37). Their results
also indicate the “unique roles played by each type of engagement in different school outcomes”
(p. 37). The authors found that a positive relationship exists between both school participation
(*behavior engagement*) and self-regulated learning (*cognitive engagement*) with GPA and
educational aspirations (p. 37). The results on emotional engagement however were more less
clear, perhaps a result of equating emotional engagement with school belonging. They found that
“although students may feel emotionally connected to school, if they are not actively
participating in school or do not use self-regulation learning strategies, they are less likely to get
very good grades” (p. 37). This does not disprove the importance of emotional engagement, but
rather further suggests that it is the most difficult of the three engage constructs to conceptualize.
Students may “feel part of their school,” “happy,” and “safe,” (p. 37) and yet these emotions
will not necessarily transfer to positive behavior or cognitive engagement. This suggests that
other emotional indicators, such as value and interest in schoolwork, must be present as well to
cultivate full engagement.

Wang and Peck’s (2013) adolescent engagement study revealed a subgroup whom they
dubbed Emotionally Disengaged. These high-performing students showed high levels of
behavioral and cognitive engagement, and yet “had the lowest level of emotional engagement
and the highest risk of mental health problems,” (p. 1271) such as depression. The authors warn,

In terms of stage-environment fit theory, this is the group of students who fit least well
into the school context. They have the cognitive skills to do well in school and apparently
feel they should attend school but do not like being there. This places Emotionally
Disengaged youths at the greatest risk for mental problems and dissuades them from
entering college. (p. 1271)
Ryan, Patrick, and Kaplan (2007; Patrick & Ryan, 2001) also applied stage-environment fit to emotional engagement in adolescence. They outline four “especially relevant” (Patrick & Ryan, p. 440) aspects of the classroom environment for “young adolescents’ motivation and engagement” (p. 440): teacher support, specifically “the extent to which students believe teachers value and establish personal relationships with them”; promoting interaction, such as “students sharing ideas during whole-class lessons, working together in small-group activities, or informal help-seeking and help-giving during individual seatwork”; promoting mutual respect, by modeling “positive and comfortable relationships and frequent prosocial and cooperative interactions”; and promoting performance goals, which notably create a competitive atmosphere at a time when adolescents have “heightened self-consciousness and sensitivity” (p. 440). The authors conducted a longitudinal survey study comparing participants’ results as 7th and 8th graders. Participants responded to questions on the classroom environment in 30 math classes taught by 15 teachers. The authors’ predictions were supported by their statistical analysis: “Teacher support, promoting interaction, and promoting mutual respect were related positively to social efficacy with teachers and peers, academic efficacy, and self-regulated learning, and related negatively to disruptive behavior,” (p. 448). The authors, with Kaplan, conducted a similar study several years later with a sample of 5th grade math students and found further evidence for the importance of fostering engagement through teacher and student support and promoting interaction (Patrick, et al., 2007). Their work emphasizes the crucial role teachers play in forming positive relationships with adolescent students to facilitate an emotionally engaging classroom climate.
Emotional Engagement

Skinner and Belmont (1993) acknowledge the importance of the classroom social environment to optimize student engagement, but narrow their study to “dimensions of teacher behavior that should foster the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of children” (p. 572) via a “positive emotional tone” (p. 572). Their model consists of three constructs: a classroom that is “optimal in structure” (p. 572) through clearly communicated expectations, consistent responses, “instrumental help and support,” (p. 572) and flexible teaching strategies; promoting autonomy support by allowing children the freedom to self-determine their behavior (p. 572); and satisfying “children’s need for relatedness” (p. 572) through personal involvement. The authors write “that the relationship between teacher behavior and children’s engagement was mediated by children’s perceptions of teacher behavior toward the child” (p. 573), and that engagement was positively affected by teachers who offered “involvement, structure, and autonomy support” (p. 573). Student participants were selected from grades third through fifth from a rural-suburban district, and teacher participants were included as well. The results confirmed a strong, positive relationship between behavior and emotion, and, “Strong empirical support was found for a reciprocal relationship between teachers’ behavior and students’ engagement in the classroom” (p. 577). The authors conclude that not only does interaction between teachers and students have “the most powerful impact on children’s perceptions of the teacher” (p. 577) and establish a climate that positively effects engagement, but that teachers benefit as well through interacting with engaged students.

Furrer and Skinner (2003) investigated engagement and relatedness. Relatedness “derive[s]from theories of attachment and [has] been posited to explain the long-term effects of
secure versus insecure attachments to caregivers” (p. 148). The authors explain, “Children with a history of secure attachments to their caregivers have been shown to function well throughout childhood and adolescence in a variety of life domains, including peer relations, school performance, and the establishment of healthy relationships with nonfamilial adults” (p. 148). Longitudinal data was compiled from questionnaires given to students and their teachers from 3rd through 6th grade and the items on relatedness were isolated for specific analysis. The authors predicted a positive relationship between relatedness and engagement, and that, “Feeling special and important to key social partners is hypothesized to trigger energized behavior, such as effort, persistence, and participation; to promote positive emotions, such as interest and enthusiasm; and to dampen negative emotions, such as anxiety and boredom” (p. 149). Though moderate differences were found between boys and girls and the sources of relatedness—whether teacher, peer, or parent—a “core sense of relatedness” (p. 158) exists, and “children who reported a higher sense of relatedness…showed greater emotional and behavioral engagement in school” (p. 158).

Lewis, Huebner, Malone, and Valois (2011) indicate a bi-directional relationship between positive affect and engagement: “Students’ frequent experiences of positive emotions were correlated with a greater perceived cognitive engagement” (p. 251). Indicators of this relationship included “relevance of schoolwork and future aspirations, and greater psychological engagement, defined as support for learning from family and peers and positive student-teacher relationships” (p. 251). The authors’ survey of 864 7th and 8th grade students indicates that a further bi-directional relationship exists between life-satisfaction and engagement—that students with high life-satisfaction tend to be more engaged in school, but also that engagement in school
can lead to higher life-satisfaction. Their work is also notable as one of the few existing studies specifically on engagement and middle school students.

The research indicates that emotional engagement is in many ways an outlier when compared to behavioral and cognitive engagement. The balance between emotions, cognition, and behaviors is not an equal relationship divided into thirds, as supported by research from Connor and Pope (2013): “Overall…average rates of behavioral engagement far exceed those of cognitive engagement, and affective [or emotional] engagement remains relatively rare” (p. 14). An absence of emotional engagement is alarming because it may be a prerequisite before behavioral and cognitive engagement are even be possible. An optimally engaging learning environment is one in which students can find value and relate to their instructors, peers, and the work. For optimal engagement, or flow, to occur, such positive affect must lead to increased concentration, and an intrinsic desire to pursue the activity to mastery. Such a heightened state of attention can only be achieved by establishing a positive emotional state as a necessary foundation for academic work.

Qualitative Engagement Studies

A majority of engagement studies have utilized empirical data, yet Fredricks, et al. (2004; 2005) have suggested that further qualitative research in engagement is necessary. Since Marks (2000) and others have argued that many aspects of understanding engagement depend on “individual student characteristics and experiences” (p. 166), more nuanced answers on how individuals engage with their academic work must be sought through analyzing students’ perspectives via qualitative research designs.
Bishop and Pflaum (2005) conducted a four step qualitative interview study of 20 students sampled from four Vermont middle schools. Students were asked to describe a typical school day; to draw and discuss a picture of a learning experience in which they were engaged; to draw and discuss a picture of an experience in which they were not engaged; and finally to offer ideas about their schools and what they would change about them if there were no limitations. The interviewers felt the combination of drawing and interviews would allow the students to elaborate on their “very clear ideas about what teaching approaches and learning opportunities engaged them” (p. 5). This form of qualitative inquiry removes the observer as a mediator and seeks self-reported perspective. Three major themes of engagement emerged: active learning, relevance, and pace—meaning more freedom and autonomy for students to work at their own rate. The authors designed their study to address the following distinction:

External observers have evaluated when, and sometimes to what extent, students are engaged by noting the degree to which students are ‘on task.’ While these observations can indeed be useful to teachers, real engagement is a complex phenomenon. Certainly the young adolescents in our middle school occasionally ‘pretend attend,’ appearing to focus on the reading aloud, the dialogue ensuing, or the lecture at hand, while thinking about other matters. Conversely, there are times when students may be deeply engaged, while appearing to drift or daydream. (p. 4)

By investigating engagement through interviews and drawings, the researchers sought to move beyond observable, external, behavioral characteristics that may be false indicators. In other words, a student may show signs of behavioral engagement, but in fact be disengaged because his cognition and emotions are not activated.

Daniels and Steres (2011) also interviewed middle school students to investigate perspectives on experience and engagement. Qualitative data were taken on a particular school wide reading curriculum, rather than on open-ended, academic experiences as a whole. For 15 minutes each day, all adults and students at a California middle school took time to read a book
of their choosing. Ninety students participated in observed classroom discussions, 18 participated in interviews, and 18 teachers were selected randomly to be interviewed as well. Results indicate that intrinsic motivation to read for the sake of reading increased amongst the students, and that along with allowing for student choice, the adult influence was a positive factor in engaging students in reading and creating a motivating environment. Nevertheless, a suspicion of confirmation bias exists here since the study seems designed to taut the benefits of a specific school program. But, it may support conclusions on how adults foster relatedness to engage students.

Extensive qualitative engagement studies, however, are not readily available, let alone those specifically on emotional engagement and adolescents. Fredricks, et al. (2004) close their widely cited article on engagement constructs with a pointed recommendation:

Research that takes a qualitative approach to understanding the phenomenology of engagement is needed. Qualitative methods can illustrate the process whereby students construct the meaning and purpose of education in a highly complex and sometimes contradictory school environment. In addition, qualitative methods can shed light on how the various types of engagement develop and interact, as well on as why some students begin to disengage from school. (p. 86-87).

Furthermore, the authors indicate that the current consensus on understanding emotional engagement lacks “qualitative distinctions between positive emotions and high involvement or investment” (p. 63). Still, they assert, “The concept of flow makes this distinction,” since it is a “subjective state of complete involvement” that “provides a conceptualization that represents high emotional involvement or investment” (p. 63). This strongly suggests that flow theory’s framework of qualitative distinctions should be applied more frequently as a means to further understand the complicated, subjective relationship between engagement and emotions. Such a collection of suggestions—for additional qualitative research into engagement, uncovering the
nuances of emotional engagement, and applying flow theory as a theoretical framework for understanding engagement and emotions—provides solid rationale for further research, especially in the context of an underrepresented age group such as middle school students.

Flow Theory and Engagement

In an investigation into the flow experiences of two talented young writers, Abbott (2000) includes a quote from “Anthony,” who explains the feeling of being fully engaged with his work:

I’m just blinking out from everything else…I’m basically talking to me and myself. Me, myself, and I, we’re having our own little conversation…Like I’ll be writing and then I’ll look up and you know, just kind of get off my train of thought…and it might be 30 minutes later…There could be an earthquake going on. It’s like me when I’m sleeping…You’re aware of nothing until it finally, until it just stops…It’s like being in a bubble (p. 75).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first researched creativity for his doctoral work in the early 1960s (1975, 1990) and noticed similar tendencies amongst his participants. He observed painters immersed in the creative process and noticed the complete level of absorption that overcame them when they were at work. He “was struck by the fact that when work on a painting was going well, the artist persisted single-mindedly, disregarding hunger, fatigue, and discomfort—yet rapidly lost interest in the artistic creation once it had been completed” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). Later while teaching a course on “play”, he noted that the experience of play is universally pursued by people of all ages for enjoyment, since adults play “musical instruments, cards, chess, and sports” (2014, p. xix). He observed, “While most of the things we do in life are dictated by biological or social necessity, play is chosen because it allows us to do well things that express who we are, what we can do” (p. xix). As Anthony shows with
his writing experiences, the lines between play and labor begin to blur when heightened mental and emotional absorption is achieved in the context of a worthwhile activity.

Csikszentmihalyi determined that play and the creative process each represent “autotelic activities,” since they are rewarding “quite apart from [their] end product or any extrinsic good that might result from the activity” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). Autotelic experiences are “simply to be experienced, because the experience was worth it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. xx). As he continued to write about this phenomenon, the term “autotelic” experience became “interchangeable” with “optimal experience, and finally with flow” (p. xx). Shernoff’s use of “optimal” to describe highly-engaging learning environments is a nod to his mentor, and his concept of an optimal learning environment is one that is the most likely to inspire flow in students. Csikszentmihalyi’s endorsement of Shernoff’s approach is clear given that the two co-authored many studies together (2009; Shernoff et al, 2003; Shernoff et al., 2014).

With the help of graduate students, Csikszentmihalyi continued interviewing and studying people engaged in all manner of activities—“chess players, rock climbers, and dancers, and others who emphasized enjoyment as the main reason for pursuing an activity” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). He also studied surgeons as an example of an occupation with definite tangible rewards such as status and a high salary that could incentivize the demands of labor and stress. He found that the flow experience was similar across all fields and activities regardless of external rewards or requirements. This work informed his first major publication on the flow experience, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975). He would continue to expand on his theoretical approach with *Flow* in 1990, and subsequent research with a range of co-authors.
The prerequisites for achieving flow are quite precise. Shernoff, Abdi, Anderson, and Csikszentmihalyi (2014), explain:

Subsequent research on flow finds that the experience is enhanced by certain properties of the task. Specifically, in most flow activities, goals are clear, and feedback with respect to meeting those goals is immediate and forthcoming...Perhaps the most central condition for flow experiences to occur is that the challenge of the activity is well matched to the individual’s skills. Typically, the challenge and skill are high and in balance—individuals stretch their skills to their limits in pursuit of a challenging goal. (p. 213)

This skill-challenge balance is essential in inspiring simultaneous concentration and enjoyment. Though Csikszentmihalyi researched experts’ experiences in his initial research, expert level skills are not required in order to find flow. Indeed, Anthony from Abbott’s study (2000) is in 5th grade. While talented, he is certainly not an expert. Yet, he is able to speak directly to the flow experience since he has discovered a worthwhile activity in which he can self-direct his skills and challenge himself. The skill-challenge balance is the determining factor for how individuals of all skill levels fully engage in their chosen pursuits. Shernoff, et al. (2014) offer an example of a piano player learning even the most basic tasks:

Even ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star’ may be too difficult for a beginning pianist. To reach flow, the level of skill must increase to match the challenge. Much like Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, the level at which most learning occurs is just one step beyond the skills one has already mastered. In this case, sufficient practice may be needed until the song is mastered. Once the song is played comfortably with relative ease, only one thing can restart a cycle of fresh learning: a new song at a higher level of challenge, causing one’s skill to increase again. Thus, the pianist may progress through increasingly difficult songs at ever-higher levels of skill. (p. 213)

This balance of high-skills with high-challenges “is significantly and consistently correlated with optimal experience” and “increases motivation, enhances competence, fosters growth, and extends the student’s capacities” (p. 213). Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) illustrate
another important aspect of the skill-challenge balance with a description of an intermediate female downhill skier:

If [she] first skies on a bunny slope, she may find that she has more skills than required and feels only relaxation as she takes in the scenery. If she continues to ski on this slope, boredom may set in. Later in the day, when confronted with a slope that is too steep, bumpy, or icy for her ability, anxiety sets in until she safely navigates her way down. Only on her favorite slopes that are quite challenging for her ability, but not excessively so, does she feel herself enter into an enjoyable, rhythmic peak experience in which time seems to stand still. (p. 132)

This shows that while a skill-challenge balance assists engagement, an imbalance leads to negative emotional and psychological outcomes. The skier in the description was relaxed because her skills outweighed the challenge of the bunny hill, but she will soon lose interest and become bored. She became anxious when her skills could not match the challenge presented by the black diamond slopes. The final skill-challenge combination, low challenge and low skill, leads to apathy. The slope that is just right for her abilities fosters both enjoyment and challenge, and thus engages her at the optimal level with simultaneous positive emotions.

A well-matched skill-challenge balance merges cognitive engagement and emotional engagement so they occur simultaneously at heightened levels. Delle Fave and Massimini (2005) reinforce that an optimal experience must be distinguished by this merger, since it is possible to concentrate on a controllable task without enjoying it, and also possible to experience “fun, excitement, and ecstasy” without “concentration and engagement” (p. 270). Schweinle, Turner, and Meyer (2008) also show with 5th grade math students that negative affect results in academic settings when skills and challenge are imbalanced. The authors contend that flow may be easier to achieve for older adolescents than younger, because of the more elective, open-ended nature of high school classes, and older students have a higher skill levels to meet increasingly difficult and specialized challenges. This does not however mean that younger, less-skilled students are
unable to find flow, but does suggest pedagogical refinement is needed to assist flow for younger age groups.

Given its positive relationship to learning, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) offer that educators should “[seek] to shape activity structures and environments so that they foster flow or obstruct it less” and “assist individuals in finding flow” (p. 99). The authors summarize an experiment at the Key School in Indianapolis, which implements a flow-centered curriculum. Students have access to the Flow Activity Center, where they are given “regular opportunities to actively choose and engage in activities related to their own interests and then pursue these activities without imposed demands or pacing” (p. 99), with teachers serving more as facilitators. Much like the piano player who intrinsically pursues more challenging pieces of music, or the skier who seeks out just the right slope, such an approach to schooling is more student-centered and likely to cultivate full-engagement as students pursue their interests at their own pace.

The authors emphasize that the flow experience is subjective and dependent on a person’s sense of self, meaning that what causes one person to experience flow may in fact provoke the exact opposite reaction in another—boredom, disengagement, or disinterest. They write, “The self emerges when consciousness comes into existence and becomes aware of itself as information about the body, subjective states, past memories, and the personal future” (p. 91). From this amalgam, people associate their sense of sense with the types of activities they have enjoyed in the past, and will continue to seek out such activities. Experiencing flow then both depends upon a person’s sense of self, and contributes to a person developing their sense of self. People who are able to find flow in their lives then are much more likely to understand who they are, and thus are more likely to be happy, to have positive self-esteem, and to be accomplished. However, Delle Fave (2009) cautions that “optimal experience does not automatically bring
about well-being and development” (p. 286) and that “outcomes vary according to the features of the associated activities and their role within the value system of the individuals and of their social environment” (p. 286). Much of this depends on how we make meaning of our optimal experiences.

Csikszentmihalyi advocates that the flow experience is uniquely important to positive development during adolescence. Being Adolescent (1984), co-authored with Reed Larson, clarifies that adolescents have strong opinions on the types of activities that are worth engaging in, and that much of the tension in adolescence stems from disagreements with adults about teens’ choices. Resolving these disagreements is necessary for preparing the next generation to positively contribute to society. The authors write,

To be adults [teens] must learn to concentrate also on tasks that may not be rewarding right away, but are necessary to getting along later on. This, in essence, is what socialization means: the transformation from one type of consciousness to another…If their attention is directed to goals that extend their skills while strengthening the self, it is being used effectively. But when it is squandered on boredom, rebellion, or amusements, socialization fails because valuable psychic energy is wasted. (p. 14)

The moodiness stereotypically associated with adolescents becomes more understandable then when viewed as a symptom of the “rivalry between competing forces” (p. 20) from “parents, teachers, even peers” (p. 20) and what their own instincts and values urge are worth doing. Such various influences form a “labyrinth of difficult and confusing choices” (p. 20). Though Being Adolescent is now 35 years old, Bassi and Delle Fave (2004) show that the passage of time has not greatly altered the typical activities in which adolescents tend to find flow, such as studying and other leisure activities. New technology in 2000 such as the Internet and cell phones began to play a role in participants’ flow experiences, and school was not a strong flow experience for participants in either era. There may be a connection between ability to find flow in adolescence
and personality type as indicated by Bassi, Steca, Monzani, Greco, and Delle Fave (2014), though personality is not as predictive as expected. Still, optimal experiences may be promoted for all adolescents “through the support of curiosity and openness to new experiences in engaging opportunities for action” (p. 829).

Guiding adolescents through their difficulties becomes a negotiation with adults, and adults must encourage engagement in activities that are both enjoyable and beneficial to society as a whole. Rathunde (1997) has shown that adolescents are more likely to find optimal experiences in their lives if their family relationships are positive and supportive, and characterized by “communication complexity” (p. 669). Such family support should help teenagers find enjoyment in activities that become progressively complex and socially oriented as they get older (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Csikszentmihalyi and Larson contend that finding flow in cooperative activities that benefit others is perhaps an “ultimate achievement” (p. 263) for human beings—what the authors call a “life theme” (p. 263). This means helping adolescents find flow in positive pursuits supports their holistic well-being now and into the future.

Flow in School

Csikszentmihalyi may be as closely associated with Flow Theory as he is with his favored methodology—the Experience Sampling Method (ESM)—whereby participants fill out an Experience Sampling Form (ESF) after being signaled via a wristwatch or beeper. The ESF features a collection of narrative responses and scaled items meant to quantify levels of emotions attached to preceding experiences at various points throughout a day. Activities that yield high scores in positive emotions can be deemed highly-emotionally engaging, possibly indicating
flow. This method yields a huge comparison of scores from a range of participants’ experiences, activities and settings—in and out of school, work vs. play, chosen activity vs. coerced, solitary or social. In 1993, he led a longitudinal ESM study of adolescents known as the Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (SSYSD). A sample of 281 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students was taken from 33 schools across 12 communities. Participants were signaled to fill out an ESF 8 times a day over the course of a week, connecting emotional levels to an array of life experiences, and yielding comparisons. The same collection procedure was carried out with the same participants two years later. The enormous amount of data gathered through the study has formed the basis for many research reports.

Csikszentmihalyi, Hekner, and Hunter (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Hekner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) used SSYSD data to report on flow states both in and outside of schools. On flow and educational settings, the authors found that being with teachers carries a similarly low happiness score to being alone, and that the educational activity associated with the highest happiness rating is reading a book for pleasure. Hekner and Csikszentmihalyi write,

A person's overall amount or intensity of flow is associated with his or her overall quality of experience…The relationship between flow and these variables appears to be weaker in the context of school work, although all are still positive….Concentration and importance to future goals were the most strongly related to flow, while mood was the least. (p. 13)

In other words, schoolwork did not provide the same level of positivity as other life experiences, but that it can be a flow experience if it inspires concentration and has relevance to students’ future goals. The authors elaborate,

Most striking…is the contrast between flow and mood and motivation. Although these dimensions of experience are positively related, even during school work, they show opposite patterns in this context. School work provides a highly positive experience of flow while it simultaneously brings mood and motivation far below their weekly averages. Not surprisingly, students also experience school work as being highly
important to their future goals and requiring much concentration. Self-esteem during school work is only slightly positive. (p. 13-14)

The negative effect that school work has on mood and motivation, separate from how relevant and challenging it may be, is important to note since it indicates that school work is inherently demotivating. It emphasizes the teacher’s role in fostering engagement and positive feelings towards school work, not exacerbating already existing negative feelings. In their 2003 report, Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter offer that school can be associated with happiness, and “that those teenagers who study more are in fact happier, even though studying is lower in happiness than most other activities” (p. 193). Even though other experiences in life are likely to be more engaging, school work can be highly-engaging if it requires concentration, provides challenge, and is connected to students’ goals and values.

However, too often students encounter teachers and instructional designs that seem to disregard student needs and wants. Shernoff et al. (2003) used SSYSD data to show how much time students spent in various instructional settings—23% to individual work, 21% to lectures, and 17% to either note taking or homework (p. 166), instructional experiences which are “noninteractive” (p. 166) and leave “little room for active engagement” (p. 171). Only 9% of time was spent in class discussion and 6% on group or lab work. From these activities, the researchers ran ANOVAs to connect the experiences to students’ engagement levels captured on ESFs. The researchers concluded that aspects of instructional design and delivery strongly affect student engagement, and that providing an appropriate skill-challenge balance seems to have particularly strong effects. In order to optimize learning, not only should more class time be devoted to interactive experiences, but students’ skill-challenge balance must be monitored and adjusted if students show signs of negative affect. The authors explain,
The balance of challenge and skill is fragile; when disrupted, apathy (i.e., low challenges, low skill), anxiety (i.e., high challenges, low skills), or relaxation (i.e., low challenges, high skills) are likely to be experienced. The experience of anxiety or relaxation may prompt an instructor to change the level of challenge, and also prompt the student to increase his or her skill level in order to reenter flow. Issuing appropriate challenges and providing opportunities to enhance skills (e.g., providing immediate feedback and incrementally teaching more complex skills that build upon previously learned skills) may be one of the most ideal ways of engaging students (p. 160).

Shernoff, Tonks, and Anderson (2014) further investigated the effects of the classroom learning environment on engagement levels. While seemingly influenced by the SSYSD, they collected their own data through an ESM study of five teachers and 140 students from seven 9th-12th grade classrooms across a variety of core subject areas. The authors found that engagement levels varied significantly across both class experiences and between individuals and concluded that a complex environment is “likely the chief attribute of optimal learning environments in which students’ involvement, engagement, self-efficacy, and sense of participation are simultaneously heightened” (p. 170). In order to foster an academic setting that allows for optimal learning experiences, some combination of flow indicators must occur simultaneously. Their study further emphasizes the importance of the teacher as a kind of emotional leader who shapes “the motivational and relational environment, especially with respect to providing environmental challenges and supports” (p. 173), rather than simply a person who presents material. They conclude,

When students believe that what they are doing is important and has clear goals, they are more likely to interact with interest and absorb what is available in the classroom environment. When they additionally are supported to reach those goals, both emotionally (e.g., via support for autonomy and intrinsic interests and feeling understood by teachers and peers) and with timely performance feedback, they adopt attitudes characterized by excitement, fun, and interest in learning. (p. 174)

Shernoff, Knauth, and Makris (2001) noted the degree to which engagement scores vary across experiences in different subject areas based on students’ interest and value in the work
and the types of activities typical to each subject area. These levels of engagement however combine in interesting ways. For example, even though students find math classes to be less enjoyable than other classes, they also rate them as “the most challenging and important to their future goals” (p. 152). Art classes are the exact opposite—the most enjoyable and yet least important. Classes centered on individual seatwork are typically viewed as more engaging, as opposed to classes based on teacher lectures. Their data shows that history classes had “the lowest levels of nearly all affective and motivational measures—challenge, enjoyment, [and] importance” (p. 152). The authors explain,

History classes are more dependent on lectures than other subjects are and rarely employ group activities, but this is probably not the only explanation for the consistently low ratings students report in history class. We suspect that the low ratings also reflect how history classes are presented, structured, and sequenced. (p. 152)

Flow happens most frequently in “nonacademic” classes which are both relevant and enjoyable, such as vocational and computer science classes. English, science, and social studies classes do not score as high as the nonacademic courses either. The authors indicate,

Although [students] reported their experiences in academic classes to be more challenging and important, they associated their experiences in nonacademic classes with a greater desire to do activities, as well as higher levels of flow, enjoyment, positive affect, and self-esteem. As was observed with classroom activities, there appears to be a tension between subjects that students find challenging and important and those they enjoy. (p. 153)

Since the “tension between subjects” likely arises from students comparing their engaging classes to the disengaging ones, this suggests that teachers in core academic classes must do more to inspire flow and enjoyment. Furthermore, Shernoff and Vandell (2007) have shown that students tend to be highly engaged when involved in extra-curricular activities, and that participation in after school programs is positively linked to social competence, and higher achievement in math and English classes (Shernoff, 2010). Given that the range of extra-
curricular activities covered in these studies included, athletics, music and art, socializing, games, enrichment, and homework completion, this suggests that students find many ways to be highly engaged outside of school when actively participating in activities with others. Homework showed the lowest engagement scores, which suggests participation in afterschool activities benefits students’ academics more than additional work outside of class time does.

Social interaction in school has also been shown to have a positive relationship with flow experiences, by both fostering it in interactive settings (Walker, 2010), and by providing a medium for flow experiences to spread like a “contagion” through a classroom via social validation (Culberton, Fullgar, Simmons, & Zhu, 2015). Johnson (2008) compared ESM data from a traditional public high school in the SSYSD sample with data she collected from a non-traditional public high school of 300 students. She investigated whether the nontraditional curriculum setting that emphasized “relational learning” (p. 80) had a more positive effect on students’ engagement and motivation than the traditional school setting. In the nontraditional school, all decision making, even hiring teachers and budget decisions, were made by committees of students, teachers and administration. Students earned credits based on mastery rather than grades, and curriculum and learning goals were contracted between teachers and students. In academic settings, the students from the nontraditional school scored higher—a 6.79, versus a 5.59 in the traditional school. Johnson pins this contrast to the particular educational environment provided by the non-traditional setting:

The non-traditional school had little or no significant effect on engagement when the students that attended the school were at the movies, taking the bus, or working. Yet when in school, the students at the non-traditional school had significantly higher levels of engagement compared with the traditional school. Their engagement increased when they went to school. The inverse, was unfortunately, true for the traditional school students. As they entered school their levels of engagement decreased. (p. 78)
Johnson concludes that the decision to emphasize relational, collaborative, interactive learning in the nontraditional curriculum accounts for the positive effects on student engagement, and that these approaches should be implemented in traditional settings.

Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) also investigated the importance of social context as an important factor in engagement, and notably focused on middle school students. Noting that “there are often problems with the contexts that students encounter in middle school”, they cite three major areas of concern, many of which overlap with Stage-Environment Fit conclusions—that students view teachers as remote and “focused narrowly on achievement” at a time when adult support is crucial; that students are beginning to highly value their peer relationships, and yet seldom are given academic opportunities to collaborate on “meaningful activities”; and finally, that adolescents are becoming “capable of complex and integrative” thought, and yet deal with a “heavy dose of lecture and seat work that students find tedious and confining” (p. 60) Since Montessori schools seek to provide interactive learning opportunities, the authors compared ESM data taken from a Montessori school with data from a traditional middle school setting to show whether a more socialized learning environment had a positive effect on student engagement. The results show that the students in the Montessori environments had more positive feelings regarding their teachers, their school setting, and their relationships with their classmates. The Montessori students also spent more time engaged in project-based and collaborative learning versus the students in a traditional setting, indicating once again a relationship between appropriate instructional design and positive affect.

As the literature shows, providing an optimal learning environment requires precisely balanced and designed instructional practices specifically tailored to the population of students in a particular classroom. This is a daunting endeavor given that a classroom of 30 students holds
30 separate perspectives on the types of activities that are worth doing, 30 different cultural and familial backgrounds, and 30 different levels of skills in various applications. Shernoff and Schmidt (2008) have also shown that engagement and flow experiences in school can be influenced by socio-economic factors, race, and ethnicity. Researchers have supplemented the initial work of the SSYSD by analyzing many combinations of participants’ experiences within the context of particular activities and settings—writing in and out of school (Abbott, 2000; Loeper, 2014); reading for pleasure (McQuillan & Conde, 1996); and athletics (Jackson & Marsh, 1996). Flow has even been studied in workplace settings (Bloch, 2000). In each case, participants reported an understanding of the flow experience and associated it with positive feelings in the context of certain activities. These studies support several conclusions: that any activity will be more enjoyable if it is chosen rather than forced; that flow is possible in any number of experiences for anyone in and out of school; that flow is associated with activities that are worthwhile and beneficial; that it is directly impacted by context and environment; and that each person finds flow through their own unique combination of chosen activities. For educational purposes then, flow theory points in two directions regarding engagement and optimal learning environments—the importance of proper instructional design that fosters positive emotional responses as a prerequisite for investing time and attention, and the psychological benefit of finding challenging tasks that a person feels are worth doing. These two strands are linked by the necessary presence of positive emotions as both an antecedent for engagement and a subsequent benefit.
Boredom is the most widely experienced negative emotion in school (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). It is such a common experience that students may feel that it is the norm, and teachers may feel as though some boredom throughout the year is inevitable. Given that flow theory shows that attention and focus are at their highest when positive emotions support cognition, it follows that cognition decreases in the presence of negative emotions. Tze, Daniels, and Klassen (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of 29 separate empirical studies on boredom from a range of countries involving 19,052 student participants. Their review concludes that boredom is indeed widely experienced across various educational settings and cultures, and that a negative relationship exists between boredom and desired academic outcomes such as “motivation, use of study strategies, and achievement” (Implications section, para. 1). The authors conclude, “Given that [the] experience of boredom in academic-related situations can accumulate over both short (e.g., minutes and hours) and long (e.g., days and semesters) period[s] of time…our results indicate the importance of intervening this negative emotion” (Implications section, para. 1).

Tze, Daniels, and Klassen rely largely on Pekrun’s control-value theory (2006) for their conceptual framework of emotions and academic behaviors. The title of Pekrun’s theory derives from how students appraise academic situations based on whether or not they have any degree of control over the outcome, and whether or not they find value in it, with emphasis on the subjective nature of each. Pekrun contends that these appraisals are antecedents for “achievement emotions,” or “emotions tied directly to achievement activities or achievement outcomes” (p. 317), meaning that positive achievement emotions only arise if students perceive that achieving success is both possible and important. Examples of “activity-related achievement emotions” are...
“enjoyment,” “boredom,” or “frustration and anger” (p. 317). These activity emotions pertain to the present moment, while outcome achievement emotions are a result of completing the activity. These emotions can project into the future, such as “hope for success” or anticipated “anxiety of failure,” and can be “retrospective” as well, such as “pride or shame experienced after feedback of achievement” (p. 317). Furthermore, achievement emotions can be characterized based on a current state, meaning occurring within moments, or trait-based, meaning emotions that become habits. An example of a negative state achievement emotion would be experiencing anxiety before a specific exam or class, while a trait achievement emotion would be ongoing issues with test or subject related anxiety. Such negative emotions are mediated by students’ positive appraisals. If a student then feels that they have the ability to study for an exam and that success is within their control, and if the exam holds importance, positive achievement emotions are more likely to occur.

While Pekrun does not explicitly use the term “emotional engagement,” his work focuses on the same research territory—how students feel based on their classroom surroundings, and how those feelings affect their educational processes. Pekrun has co-authored many studies, often with Goetz, that explore the various components of his theory. His work with Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, and Perry (2010) supports Tze, Daniels, and Klassen, and reveals boredom as the source of “deleterious consequences for motivation, behavior, and performance” (p. 545). This study used undergraduate participants, but similar results would be expected amongst younger students. Another study with Goetz, et al. (2012) demonstrated the emotional differences between homework and classwork, with classwork showing higher positive achievement emotions in certain settings. The authors indicate the importance of self-concept as a “proximal antecedent of students’ emotional experiences” (p. 230), and that emotional
experiences between homework and classwork did not vary significantly between age groups, in this case 8th and 11th grade participants. Pekrun and Goetz have also shown with Frenzel and Hall (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007; Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, & Hall, 2006) that academic emotions can vary depending on the learning contexts and environments presented by different subject-areas, just as engagement and flow rise and fall depending on the same variables. Pekrun, Goetz, and Titz’s (2002) mixed methods study revealed anxiety as the highest occurring academic emotion, that school environments and students’ emotions affect one another reciprocally, and that positive and negative emotions can form “feedback loops” (p. 102). They provide further support for the existence of bi-directional, reciprocal relationships between students’ emotions, learning environments, and psychological well-being.

Hagenauer and Hascher (2014) conducted a longitudinal control-value study of 6th and 7th grade students in Germany that is notable for several reasons. They focus on middle school students, and support the contention that positivity and enjoyment towards school decrease as students begin adolescence, indicating that the middle grades are a “critical period for positive scholastic development” (p. 26). Results also confirmed the mediating roles of control and value, and show that a strong relationship between enjoyment and achievement exists for this age group. Students who found more enjoyment in grade 6 were more likely to achieve in grade 7. Furthermore, the authors support Stage-Environment Fit by noting not only the indirect effects that positive emotions have on achievement, but also their inherent importance to psychological well-being. They conclude, “As a consequence, instruction should be designed as emotionally and cognitively supportive. It is necessary that both emotions and cognitions are fostered in school in order to facilitate achievement, as a strong interplay can be assumed” (p. 26).
Hagenauer and Hascher do not cite Csikszentmihalyi nor Shernoff in their study, which is intriguing given their agreement on the vital interplay between emotions and cognition. Pekrun however explicitly links the activity-related emotions from Control-Value Theory with optimal experiences by offering, “A student experiencing enjoyment and flow while engaged in learning, for example, focuses attention on the activity of learning, not on outcomes” (2006, p. 319), and that, “Activity enjoyment can be essential for flow experiences, fostering engagement, and creative problem solving” (p. 323). This strongly supports the conclusion that placing too much emphasis on an academic outcome without first fostering enjoyment in the activity can have detrimental effects on enjoyment and engagement with learning. Students must feel a perceived level of control over a worthwhile and enjoyable activity to fully engage with it, and a looming threat of failure or criticism negatively affects this relationship. Much like Csikszentmihalyi’s skill-challenge matrix predicts emotional outcomes, Pekrun defines “enjoyment” as the result of a student’s appraisal of positive value with a high degree of control (p. 320). He explains, “If an achievement activity and the material to which it relates are positively valued, and if the activity is perceived as being sufficiently controllable by the self, enjoyment is assumed to be instigated” (p. 323). Additionally, Pekrun has asserted that investigating the role of emotions in school must include a qualitative component (Pekrun, Goetz, & Titz, 2002) since “students experience a rich diversity of emotions in academic settings” (p. 92) and each student experiences such emotions differently depending on the context.

Besides their shared emphasis on positive emotions as a facilitator of engagement, flow and control-value theory also tout the long term benefits of an educational system that treats engagement and positive emotional development as equally important to achievement. Pekrun (2006) contends,
Emotions can affect students’ interest, engagement, achievement, and personality development, as well as the social climate in classrooms and educational institutions...Emotions are [also] central to psychological health and well-being, implying that they should be regarded as important educational outcomes in themselves, independent of their functional relevance. (p. 333-334)

Furthermore, the two theories share the contention that our emotions are inextricably and reciprocally linked with our environments (Pekrun, Goetz, & Titz, 2002). This emphasizes the need to purposefully design instruction and classroom environment to appeal to students’ emotional engagement—both as a way to mediate and provide antecedents for achievement, and to assist students’ positive emotional development.

Discussion and Conclusion

Questions surrounding the importance of engagement and how to best cultivate it have existed for as long as education itself. In writing “My Pedagogic Creed” over one hundred years ago, Dewey (1897) made the argument for properly matching a child’s developmental stage with an engaging environment quite plain:

This educational process has two sides—one psychological and one sociological; and that neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following. Of these two sides, the psychological is the basis. The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education...Without insight into the psychological structure and activities of the individual, the educative process will, therefore, be haphazard and arbitrary. If it chances to coincide with the child’s activity it will get a leverage; if it does not, it will result in friction, or disintegration, or arrest of the child nature. (para. 3)

These assertions precede the current discussion of optimal engagement in schools. It is clear from the literature that engagement is at its most optimal when the learning environment—i.e. Dewey’s sociological process—is properly designed to provide simultaneous challenge and
emotional fulfillment, both of which must be precisely psychologically matched to stimulate the child.

Amidst Dewey’s wide-ranging writings, he was very clear about what it means to craft an engaging curriculum. He observed that children are not simply “purely latent” or “listening beings,” but rather “intensely active” and that “education means drawing out” rather than “pouring in” (2001b, p. 25). This happens by “taking hold of his [or her] activities” and “giving them direction” (p. 25). These activities are driven “by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along” (2001a, p. 105). Furthermore, for school to become “part of the life experience of the child,” education must be “a process of living” and “represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground” (1897). Failure to connect schooling with an individual’s immediate interests causes education to not be “truly educative” (1897).

Pedagogical choices then must be determined based on the child’s perspective of what is interesting and worth doing. Is a child willing to actively participate in their school environment and think hard and strategically about his or her schoolwork? If so, positive growth and achievement usually occur. Does a child find their work to be worth doing and their academic environment worth participating in? If not, they are not likely to participate or think hard.

Finally, is the “social situation” of the classroom and school building constructed to specifically match the developmental needs of the children in it? Can they relate to caring and respectful instructors? If so, emotional fulfillment and engagement are likely. If not, the worst outcomes are possible—boredom, anxiety, apathy, disengagement, disaffection, stress or anxiety, and a compounding of internal struggles for adolescents and at-risk students.
This analysis of the current literature on engagement and optimal learning environments for mid-adolescent students has revealed several themes that run through the research, and areas in which further study is necessary. Adolescents require a precisely balanced academic environment that offers a level of work that is appropriately matched to be challenging but not too difficult for students’ skill levels. Instruction must be designed to be authentic and to match the developmental needs of the age group. Active and interactive instructional methods have been shown to be more engaging than inactive ones. It also strongly suggests that differentiation is necessary to match schoolwork with individual competencies and interests. The subjectivity of engagement means teachers are presented with as many individual sets of learning needs and wants as there are students in the room, which is further complicated by school work’s inherently demotivating nature. This means that beyond a complex and nuanced instructional design, optimal engagement requires the fostering of positive affect and relatedness in a classroom as well. These factors must combine simultaneously to emotionally engage adolescent students at the highest level.

The necessity of a balanced, complex, emotionally engaging curriculum becomes more pronounced during adolescence. Teenagers already struggle with competing demands from peers, their parents, and society. Decisions about what or what not to value for themselves become a constant competition. School and teachers represent yet another demand on their attention, one they are coerced to respond to until they are of legal age. Academic activities and environments that are not precisely tailored to meet their social-emotional needs become especially frustrating and can cause this period of life to be even more difficult than it already is. Adolescent students must feel as though their time in the classroom is valued, that their teachers and classmates care about them, and that they have opportunities to express themselves. And yet
too often students entering middle school find that the level of interaction and care in the classroom decreases compared to elementary school at the very time where such a decrease has the most negative impact on their psychological well-being. This surely explains the overall decline in engagement levels as students enter and progress through middle school.

An optimal learning environment for adolescents must not only provide an appropriate level of challenging work, but also foster positive emotions. However, this emotional side of education tends to be neglected in practice and the research is still ongoing. Despite the consensus of engagement as a three part meta-construct, emotional engagement has been shown to be an antecedent to productive academic thoughts and actions. Further research is necessary in this area, especially qualitative research on emotional engagement for adolescents. Quantitative emotional levels attached to activities in classrooms are certainly valuable and insightful, but allowing adolescents to explain their engagement from their own perspective will lead to more understanding of how or why these levels happen. This study will serve to contribute to the literature on emotional engagement by allowing middle school students to talk about their academic experiences in their own words, and reveal more about the significant role emotions have in creating optimal learning environments.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore mid-adolescent students’ perspectives regarding their emotional engagement experiences in middle school learning environments. This chapter will explain the methods chosen to conduct the study, including a rationale for the research design. It provides an overview of the participants, a description of the context of their school building, and an explanation of the sample selection procedures. Furthermore, it details the qualitative methods utilized to collect and analyze the data.

The following research question guided this study:

How do mid-adolescent student participants at Cornfield Middle School describe the academic contexts for their emotional engagement experiences?

Research Design

It is common for researchers to examine the multidimensional relationship among the three separate constructs of engagement—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004) but not as common to focus exclusively on the importance of emotional engagement. Given that engagement is a complex, individualized phenomenon that largely occurs on an internal level (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Newmann, 1992), students’ engagement cannot be captured solely through quantitative methods or observing
external signs of engagement. While some qualitative studies of engagement have been conducted (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Daniels & Steres, 2011), others have posited that further qualitative research is necessary to reveal nuances of engagement that simply cannot be quantified (Fredricks, et al., 2004). This study is concerned with how students from a selected middle school explain their emotional engagement experiences. A study of this nature is qualitative, since it is focused on analyzing a group of participants’ perspectives on their own individual engagement processes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Flow theory is a key theoretical component of this study, and many flow studies since the 1990s have largely depended on the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) for data collection. Such studies have yielded an immense amount of applicable quantitative data on emotional levels connected to various life experiences, including school settings (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The purpose of such research designs is to form a collection of measured experiences to compare participants’ emotional levels across various settings and activities. However, the nuances of why particular experiences inspire higher or lower levels of engagement and positive emotions than others within certain individuals must be conducted qualitatively. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi’s original investigations into flow were carried out through semi-structured interviews (1975, 1990). For this study, I used three interview questions from Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997) as part of a semi-structured survey of extended response questions, along with two questions I crafted to more clearly connect engagement with academic experiences. I coded the responses from these surveys, and grouped the participants with similar characteristics into seven focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The inclusion of focus groups was unique since the students shared their views in a social setting and the group was treated as a
unit of analysis. Previous flow studies have focused only on isolated perspectives mostly from high school and college students rather than middle or elementary school students (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi). For this study, I borrowed from past research designs when appropriate but also included methods that matched the characteristics of the participants and setting and would strengthen the existing literature.

District and School Context

Cornfield Middle School (CFMS), not its real name, sits along a country road that bisects the far western edge of the Chicago suburbs. It is the only middle school in a unit district that draws from eight surrounding communities and at 144 square miles is considered the largest in Illinois by area. This broad geographical profile provides a range of rural and suburban hometown experiences for the students. According to information from the Illinois School Report Card, for the 2017-2018 school year the population of 1,104 students was 81.7% white, and while this suggests a rather homogenous racial group, the diversity in the district continues to progress, with a 10.1% Latino population, 2.4% African Americans, 2.3% Asian Americans, and 3.4% identifying as two or more races. Less than 1% of the students are English learners, 15.2% of the students qualify for low-income services, and .4% are considered chronically truant.

Considering low engagement has been shown to lead to chronic truancy and high dropout rates (Finn, 1989), a 99.6% non-truancy rate shows that a significant number of students are attending school regularly. This suggests that disengagement has not become a wide-spread phenomenon in this building. Of course, simply attending classes does not mean that all students are highly-engaged either. However, a large majority of students, with assistance from their parents, get themselves onto the bus on time each morning. This suggests that attending school is
a shared-valued for most families in the district and that perhaps the purpose of education is valued as well in all its forms. The extra-curricular activities provided by the district are well-attended, and a significant number of students travel to the east for after school activities such as club sports, dance, and equestrian activities. Furthermore, some students leave the district after middle school to attend private high schools. Clearly however, this is not an ideal setting for generalizing or comparing academic engagement across racial groups or the effects of household income levels on engagement, since the population percentages at this site sit below national averages in these areas. But if valid perspectives on engagement are largely dependent on having a range of experiences across different types of activities in various settings, then in this regard CFMS provides a sound group of students from which to draw a sample.

Philosophically, CFMS identifies itself as a middle school, rather than a junior high. This must be noted given that the middle school philosophy emphasizes a curriculum that balances the social-emotional needs of adolescent students with academic progress rather than just preparing students for high school. CFMS boasts the distinction of a 2014 Schools to Watch award and a re-designation in 2017 from the National Forum to Accelerate Middle School Reform. This indicates that the middle school approach is a shared value among the staff ("Schools to Watch", n.d.). The CFMS building opened in 2009 and was intentionally designed to fit the needs of the middle school philosophy. It provides each of the three grade levels with its own wing, including team and conference rooms in addition to the classrooms. Students are placed into grade level teams for smaller-grouping, social-emotional lessons, and interdisciplinary activities, and the core classrooms for each team are kept closely together in the same hallway. Students’ schedules allow for two exploratory classes per quarter to pursue talents and chosen interests. Classrooms for these specialized subjects are designed to meet specific curricular needs, such as workshops
for industrial arts and MIDI labs for music technology classes. The gymnasium is accompanied by other athletic facilities such as a Nautilus equipped fitness room. Teachers and administrators are well-trained in the social-emotional needs of adolescent students and are outgoing and compassionate. While such a thoughtful approach to adolescent education does not guarantee engagement, it does acknowledge that social-emotional concerns are a prerequisite.

Experiential Knowledge and Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from a sample that is familiar and convenient since I have taught language arts and social studies at CFMS for 17 years. Considering real life demands, pragmatism dictated that a participant sample was obtained in a feasible and workable fashion to complete this study. Thus, the seventh and eighth grade students included in this study represent a purposeful sample of mid-adolescents. Such familiarity with the site and participant sample brings up questions of bias, validity, and reactivity. I admit that I have an affinity for middle school students. Otherwise I would not have chosen to work with them for my profession or to focus on their age group in my research. I feel strongly that they are an underappreciated segment of the population and are underrepresented in the engagement research. In this case, my close connection with the student population was beneficial in several ways: recruiting participants, framing developmentally appropriate questions, understanding adolescent characteristics, relating and empathizing with students during focus group meetings, and interpreting the tone of their responses. Teenagers can be a challenging group from which to elicit enthusiasm and expressiveness (Mertens, 2015). But this is certainly an easier task for those who have experience working with them, along with drawing conclusions that separate
rational generalizations for the age group with those that may just exist within the particular sample.

This study was not designed to provide an overly positive or negative depiction of either the CFMS staff, building climate, or its students, to tout any specific aspect of the building curriculum, or to claim that my sample represents what the relationship between positive emotions and engagement looks or should look like in other middle school buildings. In fact, many aspects of it were specifically tailored to protect against such biases. Certainly the culture of CFMS must be taken into account as an important influence on students’ perceptions of their engagement experiences. As such, the questions posed to the middle school students were specifically tailored to seek out perspectives on the presence of certain emotions in the contexts of types of assignments, activities, and classroom environments. Although I am a teacher in the building, and thus a source of authority over and generator of opinions amongst the students, the participants included in this study were not from my classes. The students volunteered for the study on their own free will and their participation was not dependent on receiving rewards or favorable treatment in any way. I truly feel that they were comfortable enough to be honest with me in their responses, and if anything in some cases their degree of honesty made it awkward for me to maintain a necessary level of objective distance. Maxwell (2013) writes of the connection between participants and researcher, “The types of relationships that are ethically and politically appropriate depend on the particular context” (p. 92). In this research situation, there may not have been a more qualified person talk to adolescents about their emotional engagement in academics than a veteran middle school teacher who has always valued their perspectives. Krueger and Casey (2015) also support this by emphasizing the importance of a moderator who
understands and has experience working with kids when they are the participants in a focus group setting.

I spoke with my building principal in Spring 2017 about my plan to draw participants from within the building, conduct my research during school hours, and utilize district Google apps and the students’ school Gmail accounts for data collection during the 2017-2018 school year. He enthusiastically approved of my study, signed the necessary documents for IRB approval, and was nothing but supportive throughout the entire data collection process. I also sent emails and had a few conversations in passing with our K-5 and 6-12 Directors of Educational Services to ensure I was following standard district protocols for research studies. They too were quite supportive and had minimal concerns; I was not required to seek permission from our school board.

After gaining approval from district officials, I received permission from the IRB committee to begin data collection at the end of September 2017. I distributed my first round of volunteer forms, both consent (Appendix A) and assent (Appendix B) letters, the week of October 16, 2017. Parent permission of course is required with participants under the age of 18, and in this case I needed specific permission to audio record the middle school students during focus group meetings. I presented the letter in person to two classes of eighth grade Language Arts students taught by a colleague on our grade-level team, one of which was a class of gifted students, and I asked the team leaders of the two other eighth grade teams to distribute the letter to their students. I copied another large stack of letters to divide and leave in strategic places around the building during Parent-Teacher Conferences the first week of November. At that point I began recruiting from the seventh grade and emailed and spoke to their team leaders about assisting me. These initial recruitment efforts did not result in enough students
volunteering to where I felt I could conduct a feasible study. I only had 16 letters back complete with the necessary signatures.

Fortunately, the following week I had conversations by happenstance with our RtI math interventionist and RtI paraprofessional who both offered to help me with recruitment. This yielded another group of students which further diversified my sample by including students from a non-traditional curriculum. I had another chance conversation with our eighth grade counselor, and she offered to recruit from the group of middle school students with whom she worked directly. Finally, a week later a seventh grade language arts teacher and the seventh grade counselor offered to recruit students they knew from their classes, group meetings, and supervising lunch. My colleagues’ willingness to help me was more than I could have expected, and their close relationships with students proved to be invaluable. I had hoped, quite optimistically, for around 50 volunteers, and that at least 25 would be necessary for a feasible study. By the beginning of December, the number of verified volunteers had risen to 44, and I felt comfortable moving into data collection.

Although CFMS is not as ethnically or socio-economically diverse as other middle school buildings in the Northern Illinois region, which limits the transferability of the sample, the sample was an accurate reflection of the student population and demonstrates diversity in other ways. Of the 44 who volunteered, 34 followed through in participating in the entire data collection process, a respondent rate of 77%. Three of the 34 identified as multi-racial, two as Hispanic, and one as Asian, per our school information system, meaning that this sample was actually more racially diverse than the overall population of the building. The sample was slightly skewed regarding gender and grade level—22 of the respondents were female, while 12 were male; 24 were from the eighth grade, and 10 from seventh. The participants represented a
range of academic abilities, with some from the Challenge (gifted) language arts and math classes, some from the standard curriculum, and some who received RtI services for math or reading, along with another group who received direct social-emotional support from student services. Some were athletes, others musicians, actors, artists and writers, or a combination of several identifiers. Overall, they represented a range of definite interests, abilities, and talents, and offered strong viewpoints on engaging or disengaging activities.

Data Collection

This section details the two data collection methods used in this study: semi-structured, open-ended surveys and focus groups. It is a unique design for an engagement study, drawing influence from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 1990) semi-structured approach for individual responses, but layering it with data collected in a social, interactive setting as well. These methods were selected based on their appropriateness for eliciting nuanced narratives regarding engagement, emotions, and values, each of which plays a vital role in the feedback loop of optimal learning experiences for middle school students. Although the methods of my study differ in many ways from a classic ESM-based study, flow theory and its proponents still wield considerable influence. My study reflects the notion that paper and pencil based psychometrics or observations from adults can only tell so much about the emotional experience of being a particular age in a particular setting (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Adolescents do not need the filter of an adult observer or researcher to elicit information on their engagement; they can speak to those things themselves. External signs of perceived engagement give observers a limited amount of information, and may actually be false indicators. A student may appear to be engaged for example but may actually be pretend attending (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005) by going
through the academic motions while his actual attention drifts elsewhere. Adolescent participants ought to be trusted as valid self-reporters, whether that is through filling out ESFs, writing semi-structured survey responses, or participating in interviews or focus groups.

Open-Ended Survey

The semi-structured survey instrument used in this study (Appendix C) was field tested during previous graduate coursework. In that case, I had asked a sample of students to respond in writing to the following set of three questions written by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997, p. 275-276):

1. Do you ever do something where your concentration is so intense, and your attention so undivided and wrapped up in what you are doing that you sometimes become unaware of things you normally notice (such as people talking, loud noises, time passing, being hungry or tired, etc.)?

2. Do you ever do something where your skills have become so “second nature” that sometimes everything seems to come to you naturally or effortlessly, and you feel confident you’ll be ready to meet any new challenges?

3. Do you ever do something where you feel that the activity is worth doing in itself? In other words, if there were no other benefits connected to it—money, improving skills, recognition from others, etc.—you would still do it anyway?

I added a fourth question to connect such experiences to academics:

4. Have you ever experienced any of these feelings (Questions 1, 2, or 3) through school work? Please explain what the assignment was and which of the 3 feelings you had. What about the assignment caused you to have this feeling?

I then coded and categorized students’ responses by gender and common flow activities. This field test revealed that the sample of eighth grade students understood the nature of the questions and most were able to respond to them by connecting them to personal experiences. It also showed a rough distinction between boys and girls and their flow experiences and categories of
typical flow experiences for eighth grade students, such as athletics, video games, and music. Reading, writing, and projects were common responses for students who experienced flow through schoolwork, although a sizeable portion of participants answered “No” for Question 4. Because of this, I reworded Question 4 for this study and it became Question 5, while adding another question before it to separate the responses more distinctly into one focusing on school settings and the other on school work:

4. Have you ever experienced any of these feelings (Questions 1, 2, or 3) while at school? Please describe the feeling or feelings you had. Also, please explain where you were, what you were doing, who you were with (if anyone).

5. Have you ever experienced any of these feelings (Questions 1, 2, or 3) while doing school work? Please explain what the assignment, lesson, project, or activity was and which of the 3 feelings you had. What about the assignment or activity caused you to have this feeling?

This set of five questions opened the data collection phase of my research for this study. Switching the questions from the original authors’ semi-structured interview approach to a written format changed the method slightly, but the approach was still conducive for semi-structured, open-ended responses. Surveys written in this format are referred to as “open-ended” (Mertens, 2015, p. 198) because while the particular set of questions is created by the researcher, respondents are allowed to interpret the questions for their own meaning and answer them in their own words. Responses may therefore range in many directions, but this is necessary to allow participants the freedom to describe their experiences in their own words. This showed the middle school students that their viewpoints were valued without restriction, and it aided in reducing researcher bias. Limiting the survey to only five questions was intended to help the middle school students maintain a high level of attention and effort over the course of their responses. The order of the questions was purposefully arranged to inspire reflection on the
nature of highly-engaging and enjoyable activities throughout any part of life the students were willing to share and then to specifically connect those realizations to academics.

I utilized district Google apps to create a Google Classroom page for the students to join and sent them an invitation through their school Gmail accounts. This provided an efficient way to send and receive forms, communicate directly with the students, and organize data. Some students needed extra reminders to join the group. After all had joined, I created and sent the survey as a Google Form (Appendix C) and waited to receive their responses. As with joining Google Classroom, some students needed to be reminded to complete the survey. I sent it out a few weeks before Winter Break, gave the students a few weeks to complete it, and sent reminders when we came back to school in January. By the end of January 2018, 36 out of 44 students (82%) had returned the completed Google Form. A few of the remaining eight students indicated that they were dropping out of the project at that point, while others simply never got back to me.

After compiling the survey responses through Google Classroom, I printed copies of them and conducted a round of initial coding, to be further detailed in the Data Analysis section of this chapter. It was necessary at that point to read through the responses to see how the students had interpreted the questions, and if any patterns or consistencies were apparent at the outset. After this first reading, it became clear that there were three broad similarities in how students chose to frame their answers—by responding “no” or with an unclear explanation; explaining their engagement within certain contexts, such as settings and activities; and through descriptions using emotional and value-based language, positive or negative. This indicated, as with the previous pilot study, that most of the students understood the nature of the questions, and it established a starting point for data analysis. I selected three highlighter colors—orange,
blue, and pink respectively—and color coded the survey copies to visually distinguish these three types of responses for further analysis. From there, I took the highlighted portions of the responses and typed these quotations into a Google Doc as lists attributed to each participant and their five responses. Further coding would be necessary to break these quotations down into more detailed patterns to indicate how students would be placed into focus groups.

**Focus Groups**

The choice of focus groups as a data collection method is unique for an engagement and flow study. The current manner of schooling children and adolescents is entirely based on separate individuals functioning and interacting within various groups throughout the day. This means that the school experience is socialized and that any behavior a student exhibits while at school or a feeling or opinion they have about it is largely influenced by their interaction with others. Given that the survey allowed participants to confidentially respond to questions about optimal engagement in their own way, it was logical to layer data collection with a method that included a social aspect. It seemed as though following the surveys with a one-on-one interview would have been more of the same, just face-to-face—one student at a time responding to a set of questions without any other sources of support or inspiration to draw from. Krueger and Casey (2015) contend, “The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others—just as they are in life” (p. 7). This method afforded students the opportunity to offer information in a more conversational setting, supported by a small group of peers with similar interests and engagement characteristics. Mertens (2015) concurs, “This reliance on interaction between participants [in a
focus group] is designed to elicit more of the participants’ points of view than would be evidenced in more researcher-dominated interviewing” (p. 382).

This combination of individual and socialized data collection methods helped ensure validity and guard against biases, and some students were likely inspired to offer more insight than they would have been able to offer on their own (Mertens, 2015). Some adolescents are frankly not as motivated to share their thoughts in writing, or may not have the writing skills necessary to fully articulate their thoughts. This was apparent in some of the students’ survey responses, which were quite terse. However, in a focus group discussion students are free to talk about their viewpoints without having to translate their ideas onto a computer screen. This depended on the student because others were quite eloquent with their written responses and did not have as much to say in the focus group setting. This was exactly the reason to layer the two methods—so the students were offered two separate and distinct opportunities to articulate their thoughts on the topic at hand in two different ways to help ensure validity.

Krueger and Casey (2015) emphasize that researchers should purposefully select participants for particular focus groups so that “they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic” (p. 2). The authors state, “People are more likely to share when they perceive that they are alike in some ways” (p. 5), and that in their own research “we always select participants who have something in common” (p. 5). I heeded this advice as I analyzed and coded the 36 survey responses. I already had the advantage of some degree of homogeneity given that the group of students was between 13 and 14 years old. The constraints of the building schedule meant I would have to meet with seventh and eighth grade students at separate times. But I also felt that beyond belonging to the same peer group, the students would be more
comfortable if they were conversing with classmates who shared similar interests, talents, or viewpoints as well.

After compiling the orange, blue, and pink highlighted segments from the surveys, I conducted another round of coding for more detail and nuance within the contexts and emotions the students had indicated in their answers. I began with the eighth grade students’ responses first simply because they were going to be the easiest focus group meetings to schedule since we shared the same lunch period. I used the highlighting tool in Google Docs and combed through the 26 sets of eighth grade quotations, looking purposefully for patterns and commonalities but also remaining open to similarities that I may not have anticipated. After some time, I arrived at the following list with accompanying color codes:

- No
- Unclear
- Criticism
- Homework (general)
- Reading
- Math
- ELA/History
- Spanish
- Projects
- Repetition / Routine tasks
- Sports / physical activity
- Music / Art / Creative Writing / Performing
- Playing games/video games
- Doing things for others / Volunteering
- Enjoyment / interest / favorite / confidence
- Engagement / Flow signs

Each set of student responses contained a unique combination of these codes, with some having as few as three, and others as many as seven. From there, I sought to arrange the students into groups based on shared characteristics that also met Krueger and Casey’s (2015) suggestion of five or six members as an ideal size. After some arranging and rearranging, the eighth grade
students were organized into the following five groups: “Engagement,” “Criticism,” “Volunteerism,” “Athletics,” and “Unclear.” The seventh grade students were placed into two groups of five—“Engagement”, and “Miscellaneous.” Since there were 10 of them instead of 26, I was not able to arrange the seventh grade students based on the same variety of responses I received from the eighth graders.

By the middle of February 2018, I was ready to begin holding meetings. The sixth hour eighth grade lunch period was both a common non-academic time in the daily schedule for me and the students, and it included the bonus of talking over a meal to help the students feel more comfortable (Krueger & Casey, 2015). I had kept students informed of my progress through Google Classroom posts, and I used the app again to let students know the day of their meeting. I also sent the students an email reminder when their meeting day approached and distributed handwritten lunch passes to them the day before. The eighth grade meetings were held on February 13, 14, 15, 21, and 22. In total, I met with 24 of the 26 students who had responded to the survey. One participant forgot about the meeting, and the other was absent on the day her group met. Meetings were held in my classroom at a group of pushed-together desks and began as soon as all students had shown up with their lunches. I distributed copies of the questions (Appendix D) I would be working from so students could get a sense of what we would be discussing. I used the Voice Recorder app on my phone to audio record the discussions, which ranged from 26 minutes to 39 minutes. After each discussion, I immediately uploaded the recording to Dropbox and later downloaded them to my computer. I followed a similar procedure for my meetings with the seventh grade students. My principal generously paid for substitute teachers to cover part of my language arts block while I met with them over two 5th period
lunches on February 28 and March 1. Instead of my classroom, we met in a conference room at the end of the seventh grade hallway to ensure easy access for the students.

Focus groups are utilized when nondirective, semi-structured answers are desired and when the group setting inherently supports the research (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This being said, each group discussion had its own feel and set of characteristics depending on the students in the group, their familiarity with each other, and their willingness to share or ability to articulate thoughts in front of others. I developed the list of questions to facilitate a conversation about whether students experienced certain emotions at school, the contexts in which those emotions occurred, and whether the students valued their school experiences. I felt that this information, when combined with the more flow-specific survey questions, would provide a complete and detailed set of data on when and where engagement occurs, or does not occur, in academic settings and its relationship to students’ emotions and values. The questions were colloquial enough to seem like natural conversation starters about what the students thought and felt about middle school. The questions were more of a guide than a step-by-step list, although they were sequenced to go from general to more specific. I provided more questions than we were able to directly address during the meetings, and in some cases I did not need to ask certain questions because the students addressed them in their responses on their own. The order was flexible because during a few meetings it seemed appropriate to follow with a certain question if a student had naturally taken the discussion in a particular direction. I also improvised questions at times to clarify responses and had context-specific questions ready for a few groups since they had mentioned certain common activities in their survey responses.

Before beginning the specific list of questions, I asked each student to state his or her name and to talk generally about the things in life that they enjoy doing. This seemed to be both
a good icebreaker to start the conversation and a way to match names with voices in the audio recordings. During the first meeting on February 13, I thought I would allow the students to choose their own pseudonyms as a way to ensure confidentiality from the very start. This proved to be confusing however, since as the meeting progressed and students started responding to each other’s answers as much as my questions they became unsure of whether to use the fake names for one another or the real names they had been used to calling each other for years. I decided from then on that I would just have the students use their real names during subsequent meetings and worry about ensuring anonymity later. A notable criticism of focus groups is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure complete confidentiality since the group members know who was involved in each meeting and what each other’s responses were. I reminded the students of several things before each meeting began—that it was completely up to them whether or not they wanted to share something, that they should feel no pressure to answer every question or share anything that made them feel uncomfortable, that I would not be sharing any of their responses with anyone else in the building, and that it was not anyone else’s business what we talked about over the course of the discussion. I also reminded them that their name would eventually be changed when it came time to quote responses from particular students. This study is concerned with students’ personal viewpoints on a public setting, so the questions and answers were not intended to be overly private, sensitive, embarrassing, or controversial. Students are quite used to sharing their thoughts and feelings about school with their friends and family anyway, so the focus groups were a natural echo of a typical conversation in perhaps a more extensive manner.

Upon conclusion of the focus group meetings, the nearly four hours of recordings needed to be transcribed into the written documents necessary for complete and accurate analysis.
Although I had every intention of doing this myself, it proved to be a daunting task. My goal for the school year was to at least complete my data collection, and the focus groups proved to be the most demanding aspect of this process. I worked a considerable amount of overtime in February, giving up seven lunch periods over three weeks to hold the meetings, and I felt both a deep sense of relief and exhaustion when they were done. After a few months off, in early June 2018 my doctoral advisor emailed me with a timely suggestion to hire an online service to create the transcriptions for me. Soon after, I had Microsoft Word documents in hand, courtesy of Rev.com, for each of the seven meetings. After reviewing their transcriptions, I made some necessary corrections and adjustments to interpretation errors based on my knowledge from moderating the meetings. In a few cases their transcribers misheard particular words or phrases or switched speakers’ names, but these were easily corrected.

Before I could closely analyze these transcriptions however, I needed to organize them into a common format to assist with accurate coding. There were inherent inconsistencies since each focus group discussion had its own personality and took its own direction. I needed to be able to attribute responses to individual students as well as code for patterns based on how specific questions were answered within each group. This process followed Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) suggestion of organizing by “starting with the local categories of the actors or informants themselves” (p. 32) and required a set of organizing steps. First, I created a list of the questions in Google Docs that were actually posed to each group in the order they occurred: prepared questions, follow ups, and group specific. Then I copy and pasted students’ responses from the transcriptions into the Google Doc for each group, creating a list of responses attributed to each participant. Finally, copying and pasting one more time, I created a list in Google Docs organized around each question asked and the list of students’ responses beneath it. In reality,
each group was asked a core set of six questions from my prepared list, smaller totals of other questions depending on the group, and some follow-up questions that were specific to certain groups. I had over-prepared in case prompting was required, but in general the participants seemed to grasp what I was seeking and I did not want to edit or manipulate conversations simply for the sake of getting through my entire prepared list. The goal was to allow the students to offer their perspectives on their engagement and emotions in academic contexts with as little influence from me as possible on the direction their answers took. Less proved to be more regarding the amount of questions asked and the quality of students’ responses.

Follow-up Survey

I came to two important realizations at the conclusion of the focus group meetings—there were questions I wanted to ask that I did not have time to get to during our lunch meetings, and relevant topics arose naturally during the discussions that I had not anticipated and I wanted to hear more from the students about these. I also had not yet collected demographic information from them directly, although I could use the school information system for that, and only one group had chosen their pseudonyms. I felt as though the best way to collect one more round of information would be to create and distribute a follow-up survey (Appendix E) through Google Classroom. I sent it out in the middle of March 2018 with a plea to my students to complete one more final step of data collection for me. I sent another reminder in May, but at that point it was approaching the end of the school year and it was clear that some fatigue had set in and most students had lost interest in the study. I honestly cannot blame them because they had already given me a significant amount of their time and a wealth of responses with which to work. I only received responses from 18 students, which although limited in scope still provided some
information to clarify and reinforce particular patterns of responses from the previous data collection steps.

Data Analysis

As in many qualitative studies, it was necessary to start initial coding of the opening data, in this case from the students’ survey responses, right away to get a sense of similarities, differences, and patterns at the outset. These patterns were used to organize the students into homogeneous focus groups, and further coding was conducted on the transcriptions of these meetings and the follow-up survey. The coding approach for this study largely followed the course and terminology set by Saldaña’s (2016) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Each set of data collected in this study was analyzed with similar coding techniques to not only reveal common categories and themes, but also to ensure validity as well. Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data* also provided necessary general guidance for how to do what its title offers.

**Survey Responses: Attribute Coding and Analytic Memoing**

Saldaña (2016) suggests attribute coding as a preliminary step to manage data and organize basic information for each participant. For my study, some attributes were readily apparent, such as gender and grade level. For other attributes, such as ethnicity and participants’ academic programs, I referred to Tyler, our school information system. Still more attributes came from the activities and settings students offered as part of their survey responses. These attributes came from an initial coding of their surveys and were used to guide the organization of the focus groups around students with common attributes. I also utilized what Saldaña calls analytic
memoing, a pre-coding step in which the researcher informally comments in the margins of data reports as a heuristic to guide further analysis. In my case, I printed the survey responses and kept them together in a manila folder. While giving them a first reading, I jotted down notes all over the folder to guide my thinking. At no point was anyone else in possession of these survey copies or folder. These notes assisted in three main ways: with developing the orange, pink, and blue highlighted categories as the first step towards elemental coding; with focus group organization; and with developing some focus group questions to clarify their survey responses.

**Structural and Descriptive Coding**

The elemental coding techniques utilized in this study included structural, descriptive, and initial approaches. Structural coding allows the researcher to divide larger participant responses into smaller segments that organize around one coded main idea. It “both codes and initially categorizes” the data to “examine comparable segments’ commonalities, differences and relationships” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 98) and is appropriate for both transcriptions and open-ended survey responses. Descriptive coding is similar to structural coding, but assigns topics to smaller passages in a response instead of an entire segment. This was my intent when I highlighted the students’ survey responses based on three descriptors: “no” or unclear explanations, contexts, and emotional language. These highlighted portions then became the structural “comparable segments” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 98) that I compiled into a Google Doc for more detailed analysis. The core of this study is the interaction among engagement, emotions, and academic contexts, so these inherently became the main categories through which to code for more detailed patterns. In this way, my coding approach followed the influence of my conceptual framework (Coffey &
Atkinson, 1996). In this study, the students’ responses “correspond[ed] with the thrust of questioning” (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 37) in the surveys and focus group meetings.

**Initial and Affective Coding**

Initial coding is often more detailed than structural and descriptive coding and is the first layer of in-depth analysis. It is meant to help “identify themes, patterns, events, and actions that are of interest to the researcher and that provide a means of organizing data sets” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32). There however is not an agenda for initial coding, which is why it is often referred to as open coding. The researcher must be open to whatever possibilities are discovered, independent of what the research objectives are. Since the point is to create “a starting point to provide the researcher analytical leads for further exploration” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115), codes used during this phase are “tentative and provisional” (p. 115) and “may be reworded as analysis progresses” (p. 115). For this study, even though the nature of the survey and focus group questions may have directed participants’ responses toward certain contexts and emotions, I still needed to remain open to responses that offered unanticipated viewpoints. This proved to be especially important when students spoke about specific academic settings, types of assignments, or interactions with particular teachers. I had no preconceived notion of what they would offer and needed to take their responses for what they were and embrace all outcomes. I utilized this approach across each data collection method after establishing common structures and descriptions.

Two rounds of coding were necessary for the survey responses: a round of structural and descriptive, and a round of initial coding. Since the questions themselves were specifically tailored for respondents to speak to their engagement and flow experiences, this meant that much
of the context for the students’ responses was already apparent—flow and/or engagement do or do not occur, and if they do, they are more likely to happen under these circumstances. The list of codes, to be further detailed in Chapter 4, became a simple totaling of when particular emotions or contexts were mentioned in connection with the engagement questions. For example, participants brought up sports and physical activity in the context of engagement 16 times over the course of 38 survey responses. Another set of three significant codes came from students who were unclear in their responses, answered “No,” or chose to share negative or critical viewpoints. Students with similar combinations in their survey responses were placed in focus groups together.

I began coding focus group responses with some preconceived ideas from my theoretical framework and the students’ surveys. As much as possible, I tried to carry over the same highlighting colors used in my list of survey codes, anticipating that the students would refer to similar activities and contexts. Indeed, this proved to be the case, but the nature of the focus group discussions and the widened scope of my questions meant that additional codes were necessary. I worked diligently through the transcriptions, categorizing similar responses under codes that would aid analysis, rewording particular coding labels when necessary, and adding new codes when new patterns became clear. Upon completion of this phase, I had the following list of 32 separate color codes:

- Reading
- Sports / physical activity
- Music / Art / Creative Writing / Performing
- Playing games/video games
- Connection to real world / future
- Doing things for others / Volunteering
- Criticism / Negative emotion
- Focus issues / Distractions / boredom (negative)
- Projects / Papers / Hands-on Activities / Labs / Experiments
Further influence on my coding strategy for this phase came from what Saldaña (2016) calls affective coding, or coding for emotions and values. While elemental coding techniques such as structural and initial provide a solid foundation, they are intended to be universally applicable to many types of qualitative research (Saldaña). Affective coding, however, is more applicable to the needs of studies such as this one that “investigate subjective qualities of human experience (e.g., emotions, values, conflicts, judgments)” (p. 124). Since “affective qualities are core motives for human action, reaction, and interaction” (p. 124), specific affective reactions were a key component of understanding the interaction of positive emotions and academic engagement for this group of students. A key set of my focus group questions inquired specifically about emotions in school settings—happiness, enjoyment, stress, boredom. Other
questions were not about specific emotions but prompted students to explain how other factors in a school setting affected their emotional state, such as “What effect do teachers have on how you feel at school?” As indicated by the color codes, which will be further detailed in Chapter 4, the questions prompted students to make emotional and value-based judgments about their academic experiences, but the emotions and values contained in the responses came from their perspectives. Saldaña writes, “Values coding is the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (p. 131). Certain patterns in the students’ responses did not indicate specific emotions but instead showed interest or importance. As Lecompte and Preissle (1994) explain, “Values…are situation- and personnel- dependent. They can only be assessed within the context of the conditions that produce them” (p. 7). The conditional contexts of the interaction between emotions and values is key to this study. We tend to value the things we enjoy, and this depends on an individuals’ perspective in the context of particular situations. As indicated by the theoretical framework, engagement derives from a combination of appropriate challenge and positive emotions, with heightened interest and value in the present activity as vital factors.

**Second Cycle Coding**

For final analysis, I needed to take the codes from the focus group responses into a second cycle since the students’ responses in this data collection step were much broader and less directed than the survey questions. The conversational nature of the focus groups and the length of the meetings also meant that the transcriptions were much more extensive than the students’ survey responses, thus necessitating a more detailed coding approach. I utilized a blend of pattern, focused, and axial coding, since they are naturally successive to first cycle methods
(Saldaña, 2016). After creating separate lists of participants’ quotations under each of the coding categories, pattern and focus coding allowed me to identify themes from this list of 32 initial codes. For example, participants mentioned rules and requirements, schoolwork, and timeframe were explained with negative emotions across multiple questions. These were each identified individually through a separate color code during initial coding, but it became clear during second cycle coding that this combination of three separate codes showed up in a sizeable amount of students’ responses. The following quotation from a student in Focus Group 2 shows a combination of these codes:

I do dislike the so called due date, because they usually make it seem like, "Oh yeah, do whatever you want," you know? And then you seem to have the whole world to you. But then it suddenly just crushes and it ruins the entire idea when they say, "Oh, by the way, it’s due next week." And you're like, "I don't have enough time for that." If you want good work, you're going to have to have enough time to do it. You just can't cram things in like that.

The particular combination from this example, which I short-handed as Criticism/Negative Emotion + (Time + Requirements), occurred 15 times over the course of the focus group discussions and contributed to the overall negative emotions theme on rules, requirements, and expectations. The color coding served as way to easily identify where particular contexts and emotions occurred in combination with one another. Subsequent axial coding allowed me to finally compare and contrast categories and themes to determine which were the most prevalent across the three sets of data. The total amounts of these combinations became the final sets of significant themes to indicate various relationships between emotions and academic engagement for this study. Further examples and descriptions of coding themes will be detailed in Chapter 4.
Summary

Middle school students from CFMS (n=34), with assent from their parents, participated in three rounds of qualitative data collection—surveys, focus groups, and a follow-up survey. The layered data collection design provided a rich comparison of data through different approaches. The next chapter will focus on the findings that came from the data collected.
CHAPTER 4
OPEN-ENDED SURVEY FINDINGS

This chapter includes a presentation of the findings in two major sections. First, I detail the results from the open-ended survey and how the themes from the middle school students’ responses influenced their placement into one of seven focus groups. Then, I explicate the themes from the focus group discussions and detail how the students described their academic engagement experiences in terms of the positive and negative emotions they experienced in school-related contexts.

In the first phase of data collection the middle school students responded in their own words to a Google Form survey (n=36 participants) of five flow-specific questions borrowed largely from Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997). At the conception of this study I had intended to use their survey responses in two ways—to analyze for themes that would indicate similarities between the students for arrangement into homogeneous focus groups, and to present those themes in combination with the focus group findings as my final data set. However, as a whole the survey responses lacked depth and specificity—meaning what the students shared did not reveal enough complexity to be considered themes. Table 1 best captures this outcome: a simple tally of occurrences shows the wide range of contexts students indicated in their survey responses. For example, “Creativity” was the highest occurring code from the survey responses (n=40). However, simply occurring many times did not reveal anything more than many students in this group were engaged by creativity. It was important to arrive at these
totals to guide the subsequent steps of the research, but they would need to be further explored to constitute final data.

Table 1
Open-Ended Survey Responses—Total Occurrences per Code

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Responses: Codes</th>
<th>Total Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity: Music / Art / Writing / Stage</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity: enjoyment / interest / confidence</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement / Flow</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework / Schoolwork</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition / Routines</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports / Physical activity</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing things for others / Volunteering</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA/History</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games/ Video games</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These simple totals were useful in finalizing focus group selection. Tasked with arranging 36 students into homogeneous groups of roughly five students each, I compared and contrasted students’ survey responses to find similarities. This was made more complex given that a student’s writing ability was a determining factor in how much information I had to work with per student. For example, there were students who gave paragraph-length answers for each of the five questions, while some students gave single word-, sentence fragment-, or single
sentence-length responses. In fact, some responses were so limited that the students who wrote them were placed into their own focus group.

Focus group selection became a matter of seeing where students fit together into particular response patterns. I started with the more obvious patterns first which were tightly clustered around particular groups of students, such as the Criticism and Volunteerism groups. The remaining students were placed into groups with whom they shared the most similarities.

Table 2 displays the seven final focus groups, including student pseudonyms, gender, race, grade level, and theme. Thirty-four of the 36 survey participants would follow through on attending their assigned focus group meeting.

Table 2
Focus Groups Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Focus Group Number and Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 1: “Engagement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 1: “Engagement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 1: “Engagement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 1: “Engagement”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 2: “Criticism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 2: “Criticism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 2: “Criticism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 2: “Criticism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 2: “Criticism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 3: “Volunteerism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 3: “Volunteerism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 3: “Volunteerism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 3: “Volunteerism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 3: “Volunteerism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 4: “Athletics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 4: “Athletics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 4: “Athletics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>Group 4: “Athletics”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table continued on next page
The table reveals some patterns about the participants. There were 22 females and 12 males, or 65% females to 35% males. The sample was predominately white, which is an accurate reflection of the Cornfield Middle School population. My role as an eighth grade teacher likely influenced how many eighth grade students volunteered as opposed to the seventh grade students. In fact, though none of the participants were my students, most of them came from the eighth grade level team I teach on, which was the only group I was able to present the project to directly because of schedule constraints.

What follows are evidence and examples from students’ survey responses to support the focus group themes. Captured in their own words, the students narratively describe their flow experiences.
Engagement was defined as students describing states in which focus, attention, the passage of time, blocking out distractions, and becoming absorbed in the task at hand occurred. These are key physical descriptors of flow theory, in which an individual paying attention to a particular activity achieves a balance between challenge and enjoyment and the activity becomes autotelic—worthwhile to do in and of itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Descriptions of Engagement occurred 32 times across all responses, and in two definite groups—one of eighth grade students, and the other seventh grade students.

Evan, an eighth grader, described his engagement experience in this way: “When I find a new game or I start writing, sometimes I get so absorbed in writing I don’t know what goes on around me and I don’t notice what I need to get done like chores[,] homework [,] etc.” Also from the eighth grade, Trevor offered an extensive response about a similar experience while working on a project at home:

When I was doing a project over the weekend… The project was to design a video game for ELA there was writing and drawing involved in the project…. I thought that I had been working for an hour or less, but it had actually been four hours. I did not feel tired, hungry, or hear anything around me. I tuned out everything and become absorbed in my work. The fact that the project was so big and that I did the same task for hours on end is probably what caused the feeling.

Allison gave a similar explanation of high-engagement, but in the context of her eighth grade math homework: “I often become so involved in my algebra homework that if someone tries to talk to me they have to say my name multiple times to get my attention.” She further elaborated,

For math homework assignments I tend to zone out everyone and just focus on my homework. This has proven to be a problem because I have gotten up from my desk so late during this class and because I have it ninth hour, have been late leaving the building.
She also wrote that language arts and math, “Are the two subjects that either get me very zoned in or have me feel as though I’ve repeated steps before.” Julia however was more emphatic about engagement occurring when it related to her personal interests:

This mainly happens when I’m doing something that is in my interest. For example I experienced this, this year when working on Genius Hour, because I’m writing which I love to do in my free time. Along with the suspense projects because I got to write a book and draw, another one of my interest [sic], pictures to go along with it.

Engagement was coded 11 times from seven of the ten total seventh grade survey participants. For instance, Kate wrote, “I have been so concentrated on a worksheet I was doing in one of my classes and I haven’t realized that the bell rang until one of my friends told me that the bell rang.” Grace responded similarly, “When I read and I get in the zone I can’t here [sic] anything. Another example is when I listen to music sometimes I forget I am in class and start to sing.” Maya also described strong engagement in an activity when she wrote, “When I am drawing or creating art of the sort, I often become quite enveloped in my work…I block out all other noises and let my creativity flow.” Kate, Grace, and Maya’s comments were representative of what other seventh graders said about becoming highly engaged which resulted in intense focus, attention, ignoring the passage of time, blocking out distractions, and becoming absorbed in the task at hand.

Criticism: Group 2 (Eighth Grade)

Many of the most detailed and extensive survey answers were comprised of the middle school students’ criticisms of their academic experiences. Those responses were subsequently grouped into the Criticism theme, defined as responses expressing specific negative feelings or reactions to a particular subject area, school assignment, teacher, or a middle school building
level rule or procedure. Some students seemed especially motivated by the chance to offer contrary experiences or viewpoints.

Like the two “Engagement” groups, many more students than those included in this group were critical of their academic experiences. However, five eighth grade students stood out more than the others as they provided the most compelling and representative comments about their critical feelings. For instance, Molly explained, “It feels like I am wasting my time on the homework that is assigned…It [makes me] feel like the teachers at school or school in general acts like I don’t have a life outside of school,” whereas Logan was specifically critical of math:

I do sometimes know that there is no point in doing something while at school. For example, in math class we are learning about rotations on a grid, I feel like I’ll never use that lesson in my future career.

He also criticized assignments that did not connect with his interests: “If I’m doing something that doesn’t interest me at all then I won’t do it.” Nate provided a more nuanced response when he criticized Health class for being too repetitive: “It’s the same exact thing all the time in which I take the exact steps each day to accomplish what was stated earlier and I don’t know who wouldn’t feel board [sic] after doing that.” He offered similar commentary about History because of its

long packets of homework, in which nearly all the time it feels like it could be the exact same assignment as before. And this feels pretty tiring and that makes a student worn out, let alone the fact the student will feel what he or she is learning as [sic] pointless.

Alyssa and Taylor, however, were the most critical of all the students in their survey responses. For example, Alyssa explained,

Most of the time I would not do an activity if school wasn’t making me do it…The majority of the schoolwork are meaningless worksheets that aren’t going to help me in the real world. I don’t ever see anyone thinking about the circumference of a circle, asking about how suspense develops a certain story, using the words ‘inquired’ or ‘voice’ in stories, or pondering about why the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. School for the
most part is a prison designed to ruin my chances of ever knowing the stuff that actually matters (creative writing, reading on my own terms, drawing, painting, knowing how to handle money, knowing how to get a job, knowing how to take care of my future children, learning other languages). Instead math and over analyzing take up the real life necessities slots.

Along with criticizing the school discipline system and use of referrals by her eighth grade team teachers, she further lamented,

All I see of [Cornfield Middle School] is a void that wastes my life away with dull worksheets and unexceptional teachers with the exception of six teachers. I am in an incredibly fake world where I see lots of rude kids and the lies of growth mind. If this school truly supported this idea of growth mind, then it would be more meaningful.

Taylor was also extremely critical of her academic experiences. She wrote, “I had/have many feelings of apathy towards the task/subject, for I feel that many parts of it are useless and a waste of time in the grand scheme of things.” She gave an extensive response to survey question 5, which asked if students had ever experienced flow while at school:

I feel that most of the assignments (mostly homework) are useless…Our homework is given to us so that we can regurgitate what it says onto tests and into others minds (who will also have no use for it and forget it), then forget it afterwards [sic]. Most of the work that is sent home with us can easily be done in class. I don’t think we should get rid of schoolwork altogether, but I do think the way information is given to us should change. School systems could even try experimenting with different, more efficient ways to teach us.

Facets of these criticisms were further explored during the focus group meetings, thus becoming their own thematic categories (i.e., negative emotions, stress, boredom, and real world connections and interests) which are further elaborated on later in this chapter.

Volunteerism: Group Three (Eighth Grade)

The Volunteerism theme occurred in a cluster of responses to question 3 on the survey: “Do you ever do something where you feel that the activity is worth doing in itself? In other
words, if there were no other benefits connected to it—money, improving skills, recognition from others, etc.—you would still do it anyway?” (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997, p. 275-276). Though intended to inquire about the value of an activity regardless of external awards, a group of eighth grade participants interpreted this question as volunteering their time for others. The Volunteerism theme then was defined as responses in which students explained activities which were worthwhile because someone else benefited from their efforts besides themselves.

Examples of volunteerism occurred in several eighth grade responses. Ella explained it best when she wrote, “Sometimes things need to be done for the benefit of others. An example of this would be volunteering at a homeless shelter. You do it just to help someone else [,] not to do something for yourself.” Likewise, Clay explained, “I love volunteering for anything like helping a teacher with passing out papers, helping anyone pick their things up,” and later, “I loved volunteering to help and stay after some of my classes to help my teachers clean up the classroom.” Comparatively, Samantha did not use the term “volunteering,” but expressed a similar sentiment:

Yes, I do many things that may require my assistance, but doesn’t have a reward. Doing these types of things are good to be kind, loyal, and helpful to others. All of these activities are worth it, and they make you feel concentrated in what you are doing.

Amira qualified her response, but also wrote about benefitting others: “It depends on whether it is the right thing to do…If it is good or going to help someone else than I would do it without reward.” The most extensive response from this group came from Owen, who recalled,

I have an elderly neighbor two doors down and she has gone through many surgeries and such to where she can hardly walk, let alone make meals for herself. So my family makes a bit more than what we need for dinner so we can sent [sic] her some. I then go and deliver it to her and usually sit with her and talk with her too. It doesn’t have any benefit too [sic] it, but it feels good to know you are helping out and supporting where you can.
This group is clearly an example of how the intended meaning of a question can be interpreted differently by participants. Satisfaction through volunteering is in fact in opposition to flow theory, in which engagement occurs regardless of external motivation. In school however, it is probably difficult for a student to conceive of activities as autotelic. This misinterpretation is notable in its own way however since a group of students arrived at the same meaning. I made sure to inquire specifically about volunteering when we held our focus group meeting. This conversation however did not fit with the main findings of this study, and would need to be repeated with a larger sample of students with similar thoughts to become its own data set.

Athletics: Group Four (Eighth Grade)

Responses in which students connected flow to sports or physical activity were grouped into the Athletics theme. Question 2 from the survey asked, “Do you ever do something where your skills have become so ‘second nature’ that sometimes everything seems to come to you naturally or effortlessly, and you feel confident you’ll be ready to meet any new challenges?” (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen, 1997, p. 275). This wording caused some participants to recall physical movements or activities involving a certain amount of repetition, practice, or muscle memory. Some students connected this to academics, such as practicing math equations until they became second-nature, but a specific cluster of eighth grade students referred to sports or athletic experiences in their survey responses, which subsequently became the Athletics group.
For instance, Cameron wrote, “When i [sic] play basketball i [sic] don’t have to try to make a layup.” Similarly, Maggie responded, “I play sports and we practice the simple things so much that in a game I do something right and I don’t even realize until after the fact.” Zoey also mentioned volleyball, and that she is “always improving at that anyway.” Switching activities, Kyle explained, “Riding my dirt bike feels natural now from riding a lot and I get faster every time. I am also more confident now I want to make bigger jumps and do motorcross in the future.” Furthermore, Nina connected physical activity to survey question 1 and also provided her own comparative list: “While I am doing homework, talking with friends, playing sports, or am about to run a race… I focus completely on that thing and zone out most other things around me.” For survey question 2, she listed, “putting in my contacts, brushing my teeth, tying my shoes, etc.” as examples of practiced movements.

Like the Volunteerism group, these students were grouped together because they showed a similar interpretation of a specific survey question. I also had a specific conversation with this group about athletics during their focus group meeting, but this did not become its own data set.

Unclear: Group Five (Eighth Grade)

The Unclear theme included responses bound together with their own pattern of inconsistencies. A number of students’ answers were lost in translation either because students had a response in mind that they were not able to clearly articulate, and/or a response was difficult for me to adequately decipher or interpret, and/or they misunderstood what the question was about which caused their responses to be inconclusive. This tendency for misinterpretation also meant their responses had no discernible pattern to connect with the other themes.
For example, Danielle wrote as a complete response to survey question 1, “yes because some things are taking over my mind so I cannot focus,” affirming the question but then also denying the feeling. Additionally, she wrote for Question 2, “yes because like I am very flexible unlike others.” There is certainly a point to what she wrote, but interpreting it would require too much supposition. She wrote simply, “no,” for Question 4, and “usually if we are doin [sic] something like pointless that isn’t for a grade,” for Question 5. Many students in this group misinterpreted Question 5, which asked them to refer back to the previous questions and connect their feelings with academics. Joe wrote for Questions 1 and 2 respectively, “yes, When I’m working I tone [sic] everything out and don’t let it get to me so I can pay attention,” and, “yes, I come to new challenges all the time and you jut [sic] gotta face them.” However, for survey question 5 he wrote, “yeah at home when I’m with family it just gets hard to do work.”

Other students also contradicted themselves in their responses. In response to Question 1, which actually asks about blocking out surrounding noises, Drew wrote, “Yes, I sometimes get really into my work and my concentration is 100% but I can still listen to people talking and know what their [sic] talking about at the same time.” Drew’s other responses were clearer, but he also mentioned “stress” and being “worried” and “mad” about a project for Question 5, which inquired about positive feelings in academics. Celeste answered affirmatively for Question 4, but also wrote “I have done this before,” for Question 1 without elaborating any further, and “There is none I can think of,” for Question 2. Likewise, Jon had a few clear responses regarding homework, but others were vague. For Question 2 he responded, “Yes and no because History and ELA come to me better than math does,” and for Question 3, “I would do and anything to improve my grade and do anything.”
It was clear that writing ability was an important factor in the amount of information students were able to offer me. This was a predominating reason for why the focus groups were used as a second data collection method—to layer the written responses with verbal responses to help ensure validity. This proved to be prescient because although the Unclear group may have struggled to articulate their thoughts in writing, they had no such issues when it came to the focus group meetings. In fact, their verbal transcriptions were some of the most detailed and elaborate in the entire study, and their meeting was congenial, energetic, and spirited.

Miscellaneous: Group Seven (Seventh Grade)

Two research considerations necessitated the creation of a miscellaneous group of five seventh grade students. First, there were only ten seventh grade participants total, and second, the focus groups would need to be separated into eighth and seventh grade meetings since I met with them during their lunch periods. This meant that there would need to be two seventh grade focus groups of five students each. Since five students clearly articulated feelings of engagement or flow and became Focus Group 6, the other seventh grade participants were placed into a group together. While there was not a guiding theme of similarities between them, they were from the same grade level and happened to be all females, which seemed enough homogeneity to inspire unity within the group and subsequently led to a productive focus group discussion.

Open-Ended Survey Findings: Conclusion

As the evidence shows, the CFMS students were able to offer information of various breadth and complexity through their survey responses depending on the individual student. While there was not enough consistency in their responses as a whole to determine any revealing
patterns, there were enough similarities to guide homogeneous focus group selection. The complexity and nuance the students were able to show during the focus group discussions greatly outmatched what was shown through most of the survey responses, as will be detailed in the next section of this chapter.
CHAPTER 5

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS—POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

After the findings from the survey responses were coded and the students were placed into groups by survey response themes, focus group meetings were held over the course of three weeks. Because of the particular demographics, dynamics, and theme of each group, every meeting had its own feeling and set of characteristics. Some focus groups needed prompting from only a handful of questions and their conversations took over from there. Other groups required more cajoling to elicit further insights. Still other groups were somewhere in the middle regarding their congeniality. I chose each of the core questions because of their simplicity, clarity, and focus on the key concepts from emotional engagement and flow theory. The questions were left open-ended so the responses would be from the students’ perspectives. The coded results became combinations of particular emotions experienced in certain academic contexts, with specific combinations occurring more frequently across the seven conversations. These results are presented as a natural split between two overall thematic categories: positive emotions and negative emotions.

Positive Emotions and Academic Context

Each focus group meeting began with the students introducing themselves and explaining the types of activities they enjoyed. Then the students were posed a simple question: “How do you feel while you are at school?” There are innumerable possible answers to this, which was
really the point—to show the students that I wanted them to share honest viewpoints about their school experiences. Their answers would have either a positive, neutral, or negative connotation, and their responses were coded as such. Most of the students answered with a mildly positive to neutral brief explanation, while others immediately jumped to specific, detailed examples of emotions and contexts. Others went in a negative direction right away.

The next set of questions, with some variance depending on the group, were specifically about positive emotions—“Is there anything about school you enjoy? What/why?” or, “Do you feel happy at school? If yes, explain.” This prompted the students to consider whether certain types of emotions occurred at school, but again the specifics were left to the students to offer. The meetings were concluded with a summative question: “Are there any assignments you have done that combine hard work with enjoyment? Please explain.” From these open-ended questions, as well as other group-specific conversations, specific patterns became clear regarding the contexts in which positive emotions occur for these middle school students in academic settings (Table 3). The group which had the highest total for each thematic category has been shaded.

Table 3
Positive Emotions and Academic Context—Overall and Focus Group Total Occurrences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context for Positive Emotions in Academics</th>
<th>Total Occurrence</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 1</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 2</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 3</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 4</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 5</th>
<th>7th Grade Group 6</th>
<th>7th Grade Group 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Social Interaction</td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table continued on next page
What follows are evidence and examples from the focus group meetings to support each of the themes. Captured in their own words, the students narratively describe their experiences with positive emotions in academics.

### Positive Social Interaction

Given that humans are social creatures, learning is often facilitated through social interaction. Teachers often utilize group work, discussions, and other forms of cooperative learning for a few reasons—they help students develop their social-emotional skills, give them another person with whom to discuss ideas and problem-solve, and provide the bonus of peer interaction to make an activity more enjoyable. Accordingly, enjoyment through social interaction...
interaction was the highest occurring context for positive emotions in academics from this group of participants (n=44), with six of the focus groups having at least five occurrences.

“Friends” became a common reference for many students. To some, school seemed to function mainly as a place for friends to congregate irrespective of academics. But to many of these students, it was clear that friends helped facilitate positive emotional responses in school, balancing out other aspects of academics which do the opposite. For example, Nina from Focus Group 4 said, “Well, I like school just because I think it's fun to be with friends.” From the same group, Zoey and Grace gave similar simple statements. Eighth grader Amira (Focus Group 3) expressed some ambivalence about school, but then added, “Very fun. That's one of the only upsides. You get to hang out with your friends. It’s fun.”

Some students specifically connected positive emotions and friends with lunch or exploratory classes since those are the only periods in the day where friends from separate eighth grade level teams get to be together. For example, Ella (Focus Group 3) offered, “I feel happy at lunch, because I get to eat, and I get to see my friends.” Celeste (Focus Group 5) also declared,

I feel happy when I'm at lunch because I don't really get to see my friends in classes because all my friends are in Red Team and I'm on Blue Team so whenever I go to lunch I feel happy because I get to see my friends for the first time of the day.

Anali (Focus Group 7) from the seventh grade did not specifically use the word “friends,” but expressed a similar feeling about lunch and Exploratory classes:

I think we're mostly hyper and happy like lunch time and Exploratory times, because it's not just our team in that class. It's everyone from all the different teams in that class too, so we get to see some people that we don't usually work with throughout the day, and we're just around more people too.

Eighth grader Danielle (Focus Group 5) contrasted the social experience at lunch with her academic classes:
I also feel like lunch is a good time because we can talk all the time, go on our phones. A lot of our other classes ... if we're with our friends, it's a lot more enjoyable to have them in your class with you.

Other students spoke about the importance of friends, but were more specific about a particular function these friendships serve throughout a school day. Focus Group 1 from the eighth grade had the highest total number for this social interaction theme (n=11), and two of their group members spoke of friendship providing a support system or respite from academic intensity. Allison described,

I think it's helpful to be able to have conversations with your friends that aren't really school related as long as you're getting your work done at the same time so you can kind of get out some of that stress that's been all day or all week or whatever from all the other stuff that's going on.

Likewise, Julia hinted at friendship assisting both personal issues and academics:

There's been two times where I've been really upset in ELA but that's only because of my personal problems but usually, I'm usually pretty happy because a lot of my friends are in there and they all sit by me... It's just one of those things where it's like most of the time it's independent work time and we're hanging out, talking, but getting our work done.

Students from other focus groups had similar responses. From Focus Group 6, seventh grader Grace also emphasized how friends can be an emotional support in school:

I feel happy at school unless like there's something bad going on. Like my grandmother, she has cancer so like if she's in the hospital, something that I might not be the best me but my friends can always cheer me up when I come to school and stuff like that.

From Focus Group 2, Nate also explained the support-system friendship provides: “Well, I mean, for the most part, I feel welcome at school, mainly because I know I'm going at it not alone. I'm going to be with people I mainly know.” Similarly, during the same discussion Molly showed that friendship improved her mood:

And so whenever I'm happy at school, it's because of my friends. Because I'll be in a bad mood, so I'll come into my class and they'll already be there in a good mood, and they'll say something and you'll try to be in a bad mood, and then you have no choice but to feel better. That usually happens a lot.
Jackson (Focus Group 7) from the seventh grade stated simply, “That's what makes school fun, friends help each other.”

A few students explained how school itself is tiring or energy-draining, and how friends act as a counterbalance to that, as shown in a two statements from Focus Group 1. Julia shared,

When I can sit around with my friends and stuff, it makes me awake more and kind of happy hanging out with my friends...I still do my work but I also can talk to my friends and can have that point in the day when I'm more awake and having that experience.

Evan discussed working with friends, but his connection between friends and energy places his response more in line with Julia:

I mostly think it's easier to work with partners too because it gives me a little energy boost because you're talking with a friend and you can actually focus on the work better because you're actually doing stuff, you're awake instead of just writing a whole essay by yourself and just thinking to yourself and nothing is going on and you're just being really tired.

Ella (Focus Group 3) shared comparable thoughts:

Sometimes in the morning, I'll be like, ‘I don't wanna go to school. I'm too tired to go.’ But then when I get to school, then I'm like, ‘Now I don't wanna leave.’ Cuz I'm with all my friends and its happy here.

To Molly (Focus Group 2), friends helped alleviate her boredom:

And so the only reason I never got bored in that class is because my friend was there, and so we made everything fun out of it. We made fun of the worksheets, and we had fun with it. And yet, we were still able to pass and get good grades.

Another group of students within this theme connected social interaction with specific academic activities such as group projects or other cooperative work, or class discussions. They suggested that learning is more enjoyable when combined with social interaction. Molly commented on this, and drew a contrast with elementary school, saying, “I think they should make learning more interactive with other people, because when I was in elementary school, I woke up and I was excited to come to school. Now, I wake up and I'm like, ‘Oh.’” Nina (Focus
Group 4) said, “I feel like it's more fun when we can be loose and still get work done, but also talk to people we want to at the same time.” Also from Group 4, Maggie responded, “I think when we work in partners, it's also fun because you get to see what the other person is thinking, rather than just working by yourself.” Seventh grader Ava (Focus Group 7) was more specific about group projects, offering, “I especially like group projects because you get to work with your friends, and sometimes you can choose with the groups and everything…And you can work with the people you want.” Celeste (Focus Group 5) echoed this, but connected peer interaction with assisting her comprehension: “I feel like it also helps when you're learning because then you can just ... if you have friends you can work on homework together. Understand what's going on in the class.” She followed with,

I feel like it depends on your class. Who's in it. Because I know in science I have three friends I have always stuck around. If I have any projects, I always do it with them because I'm not really friends with anybody else, and it's morning and no one's actually ready to socialize with other people.

During the same meeting, Joseph drew a contrast with projects in which he was not allowed to work with friends:

If you're in a group and it's a fun group ... you have at least one or two friends in there ... it's good. If you don't have no clue who any of those people are it's a little difficult and challenging.

Some students were even more specific about why they prefer working with groups or partners rather than working by themselves. Danielle (Focus Group 5) stated,

I also really like group work because you can pick your group and you can work with people you get along with and a lot of times you get your work done a lot faster because multiple are helping you with it.

She followed that with a specific example:
I feel like for me for my Historian Hour ... my partner ... we had a lot of fun making our project on it and we got along pretty well but that was good because we could get along really well we liked each other so it wasn't hard to communicate with them.

A few students specifically used the word “discussion” in their responses as an interactive teaching method that was effective for them. During the Focus Group 6 meeting, Kate said, “And when we have whole class discussions, like most of our classes on one sided, there's a couple of others, so it's really fun to try and get them on your side,” while Morgan stated simply, “We do live discussions. Those are fun.” Anali (Focus Group 7) gave a more descriptive answer for how a particular teacher runs a discussion assignment:

Miss [A] tells us to make videos a lot, like about discussions, and I guess that's fun too, because she puts us in different areas of the wing so we can't hear different groups. So one time my group was in here, and it was fun because we had to keep retaking the video, and we all enjoy each other's company too, so just having that reassurance that, whether I'm in a bad group or a good group, I'll still enjoy the people I'm with because I know them all and...you can tell that they enjoy your presence.

Julia (Focus Group 1) also offered why she enjoys discussions in her social studies class:

I really like having in-class discussions, like in Mr. [A] 's when we're allowed to say what do you think or just having a lot of in-class discussions about what I think and what I'm enjoying and all that kind of stuff. I feel more open on talking rather than ‘What's the answer to this problem?’ and then I get picked and I don't know it.

Maya (Focus Group 6) may have given the most personally reflective, and perhaps most ironic, statement on why she prefers group work to working by herself, and the benefit of combining social interaction with academics:

So if I don't have, I don't know, there's just something about working in groups that works for me because then I'm able to see my own flaws through other people not paying attention and I can get back on track. But when I'm working independently I can't really get myself back on track because I don't really notice it until the period is over.

Social interaction was clearly a dominant context regarding how students framed their descriptions of enjoyment at school. Sometimes this interaction was described as being enjoyable
on its own and sometimes in conjunction with schoolwork. This fits well with adolescent
development since teenagers begin to rely more on their friends for sources of support and
happiness. Many adolescents view school as a required burden, so it follows that they would
look forward to seeing their friends, and that socially interactive schoolwork would be more
enjoyable and engaging.

Positive Interaction with Teachers

Some topics stimulated more extensive and energetic discussions within the focus group
meetings than others, and that was certainly the case when each group was posed this question:
“What effect do teachers have on how you feel while you are at school?” Like the social
interaction theme, this question generated strong descriptions of both positive and negative
emotions depending on the individual student’s opinions and the direction each group took the
discussion. However, the descriptions of positive emotional experiences with teachers occurred
more frequently (n=37) than the negative emotional experiences (n=23). This theme was evenly
dispersed between the focus groups, with five groups having at least five occurrences, and the
others having at least three.

Many of the students made direct statements about the amount of influence teachers have
on the feel of a learning environment, to the point where some even seemed to depend on their
teachers to establish a positive mood for them. Group 2 had an especially revealing exchange on
this topic between Alyssa, Nate, and Logan, which led to their group having the highest total in
this theme (n=9). For this trio, emotional dependency on teachers commenced as soon as the
school day started. Alyssa began with,
About making the learning fun, that was one of the strengths of sixth grade and our sixth
grade teachers and even the elementary teachers, because they made learning fun, at least
the good ones. And so they make you want to go back. [Students] need to think, ‘I want
to learn what they teach. I want to do that.’

Nate followed,

A learning environment must welcome students to want to learn, just to make them feel
like they're accepted in here and that they can do whatever they want to learn. And a
teacher has to have the same aspect I feel like.

Logan then completed the exchange:

Going to the teacher thing, kind of going back to Nate's point, I think teachers should
make the learning fun for kids, just so they want to wake up the next morning thinking, ‘I
want to go to school,’ and not, ‘I don't want to go to school.’ And plus, they might help
them learn in a fun, cool way.

Though expressed in each student’s unique way, the three agreed that whether or not they looked
forward to school or a teacher’s class depended on whether or not they enjoyed their teachers.

Samantha expressed the same notion in the Group 3 meeting:

I mean, teachers need to fulfill the students’ needs of educating them, things like that. But
also the kids should want to be able to come to class. They don't want to be like, ‘Oh my
gosh, we have to go to this class?’ Like the teacher should make it exciting and they
should make it like, the kids want to come to class and they're not like, ‘Ugh I have to go
to so and so's class.’...They should be excited to go to school.

Others expressed the same idea, but more succinctly. For example, Cameron from Group 4
offered, “I kind of look forward to teachers that have a good attitude,” while Kyle from the same
group also admitted reluctantly, “I guess if they're more fun, you want to go to class and stuff.

Yeah.” Similarly, Lily (Focus Group 7) from the seventh grade looked forward to school
because, “I get to mess around with my first hour teacher.”

Beyond looking forward to spending time with certain teachers, Logan later suggested
that the capacity teachers have to affect students’ emotions can outweigh disinterest in a class
and may have a lasting effect throughout the remainder of the day as well:
Even though I do not like math at all, sometimes my teachers will be in a good mood, and then that puts me in a good mood and that makes me want to keep going for the rest of the day.

Anali (Focus Group 7) also suggested that her teachers helped her get through the day in a similar way, but because, “My more fun teachers are my later periods of the day, so I end off my day pretty well.” Alyssa identified a particular teacher’s emotional influence as the reason she enjoyed her Spanish class:

I feel happy whenever I'm in Spanish class, because of Senorita [B], because then she makes it exactly like elementary school. Like one trip to Senorita [B’s] class, and you're back in elementary school and you're allowed to be imperfect. You're allowed to have fun and all that.

Another group of students commented on teaching styles and methods as important emotional factors. Rather than crediting teachers as an emotional guide, the middle school students focused on teachers as the decision-makers for what form a lesson took and then explained how those decisions affected their enjoyment. Trevor from Group 1 proclaimed,

I find it easier to do hard work when the assignments are being changed up and the teachers are being taught in more creative ways instead of every day it's a lecture about something slightly different than what you learned yesterday and tonight you're getting the same style homework that you got last night and same thing just forever…I enjoy it when the teachers change, so one day you'll learn how to do something through a hands-on activity and the next day it's through a video and then you do a paper about it. And it's just different every day because then there's variety and it keeps you interested.

Likewise, Nina (Focus Group 4) also explained how a teacher’s choices regarding the organization of activities impacted how she felt about class:

When I walk into certain classrooms and the teacher's great and has the agenda on the board and the activities we're going to do and they're excited to teach. It's easier to get more excited, rather than walking in and just having someone say, ‘Grab these sheets of paper and work on it.’

Seventh grader Makalya (Focus Group 7) also appreciated it when teachers strove for variety and student enjoyment, stating, “I feel like more of the more positive teachers give more fun
activities, because they try to find new ideas to make other students happy.” Comparatively, Amira (Focus Group 3) explained the same idea but included views on teachers’ tone at the end:

I feel like for me, it mainly depends on the teacher… If [they’re] using enthusiasm and using examples, using images. They're showing their passion of the subject, then it makes it a lot more enjoyable and it makes it feel like it’s not work, you're just having a conversation. I don't know. I feel like its way more entertaining and fun if they're passionate about it.

To Amira, a necessary amount of passion and enthusiasm were key components of a teacher’s style. Similarly, other students picked up on the substantial influence a teacher’s tone has on the feel of the room and thus whether pedagogical choices led to enjoyment. From Group 4, Maggie stated,

Well I feel like, depending on who the teacher is and how they act, if the teacher has a monotone voice, then you're not going to have fun with anything that you're going to do. But if they're super excited about the topic we're learning about, then I'm going to get more into what we're learning about then.

Alyssa returned to Seniorita B as an example of a teacher who sets a positive tone for the room:

“And Senorita [B], for this case, because she's the best teacher. In my opinion, she's the best teacher at this school. She isn't rude, she isn't sassy. She's just pleasant and kind, and herself.”

Owen (Focus Group 3) offered two separate and similar explanations. First, he stated, “Well one thing that's kind of different that I hold an opinion of is I like it when a teacher respects the students.” Later, he stated,

I think the teacher really sets the tone for what the class is going to be like… For the most part, I really like the environments on this team. Mrs. [C]’s class, it's a lot of learning, but she'll still pause every now and then to have some fun, crack a joke. And I think that's kind of important, especially in a class like algebra.

Jon (Focus Group 5) also contended that humor was a vital component to a teacher’s style to alleviate the seriousness of school:
Yeah. Mrs. [D] makes it fun and all because me and Jenna are pretty much the only ones in class that actually like the science jokes on Fridays. So I always look forward to Fridays, because Fridays we get the ‘Cringe-y Dad Science Jokes.’

In addition to humor counteracting the rigors of academics, other students spoke of teachers’ empathy serving as a stress reliever. This was evident in two exchanges from the Focus Group 1 and Group 6 meetings. From Focus Group 1, Allison recalled a situation in which the team teachers had moved around some due dates to be more accommodating to the students’ schedules:

Okay, so I feel Miss [E] is a really good example of this…I feel like she understands that things are stressful for students. Kind of that whole situation, I think it was a couple weeks ago, something like that, where we had a bunch of things all at once. So you guys talked to each other and you decided and we're gonna back this up, break it up so it's not as stressful for us…This team especially is really good at that, at just realizing that it's hard for students and that things are difficult for us because we not only have to do this, we have to balance it with outside stuff at the same time so you understand that there's a boundary where it has to be and you actually take into account that we want to do things well, we just sometimes don't have the ability to.

Trevor then supported Allison’s explanation:

There could be really good teachers that can make you more interested in the subject and actually kind of feel what the student feels. You know, stress and stuff like that. That relates to what you said about Miss [E] and stuff. Because she relates to us with a lot of stress and she kind of... She handles it really well with us talking and stuff about it.

Then Allison returned to the topic once more:

Like History when we get these packets and then we also have a test and then in Science we also have a test, it's just kind of stressful. And I like in ELA I really like how the teachers take in consideration like, ‘You guys have a lot of tests; we're just gonna kind of have easy days so far," and then get back into what we're doing after everything's done with.

During the Focus Group 6 meeting, seventh grade students Maya and Jackson also described how teachers could show empathy. Maya stated generally,

I think it's necessary for teachers to be on top of things when it comes to turning in assignments, because I can appreciate if you should understand if you're mental. You're
like being overwhelmed by the amount of homework and then they can give you an extension.

Similar to Allison and Trevor, Jackson supported Maya with an example of a specific teacher who would not proceed with material until she was sure students understood it: “That's what Ms. [F] does, most of the day is learning a lesson and trying out to see if everyone make sure they know everything and then we go into doing the tests about it.”

Another group of students within this theme were less specific about the positive emotional influence teachers can have on them, but showed how keenly students observed teachers’ behavior within the building and how positive teachers can pass that feeling onto those around them. Jane (Focus Group 7) identified a basic dichotomy within CFMS: “There are teachers that give us really happy vibes, and those are the teachers you want to be around. And then there are teachers that they give out these vibes that they don't really like their job.” Jon (Focus Group 5) noticed this as well, and offered examples of particular teachers to support it, accompanying his statement with some mimicry during the focus group meeting:

A lot of teachers are really nice. There's a bunch of teachers that I really like that I know they chose--like Mrs. [G] and Mr. [B]--like I know why they chose this path. But some other teachers are plain rude which I find that so weird but…And Mr. [C], you see him walking around like this all the time because he likes what he does. And some teachers are just grumpy with their arms like this walking around all the time.

Anali (Focus Group 7) also made it clear that how a teacher carries him or herself is an obvious sign of their own emotional state:

I think teachers definitely play a big role throughout the day, because there's teachers that you can tell they love their job and they love the people that they're around, and it's especially nice to see throughout the day, like the teachers talk to each other and connect with each other.
Notably, to Anali much of this is actually revealed in how teachers interact with each other. This shows that teachers modeled positive behavior for these students when they may not have realized it.

To a final group of students within this theme, the ideal teachers were able to form the closest relationships with students. Alyssa used the term “close bond” in two separate statements. First, she explained, “I noticed that I don't get bored, rarely ever get bored, almost never, never, get bored in the classes where I have a close bond with the teacher.” She supported her idea with examples of teachers from the building: “And Digital Arts, because it's art. And Mr. [D] I actually like him. And also before I switched out for Digital Art with Mrs. [H] because Mrs. [H] I feel a close bond with.” Logan from the same group borrowed the term for his own teacher example: “Yeah, Media Production…That's a happy time, especially with Mr. [B]. He's a really cool teacher to hang out with. Very close bond.” Likewise, Ella offered an example of a particular teacher who formed a similar bond by relating to the students on their level:

Like, Ms. [E], she'll respect us and stuff. We would always say ‘Chromies’ instead of Chromebooks and then she started calling them Chromies and started to act like us and we thought it was cool. Cause we were like, ‘We gotta put the Chromies away. Go put the Chromebooks away,’ and we're like, ‘No, the Chromies.’

To Jane, this respectful relationship is further supported by teachers showing their dedication to their students’ achievement. She said,

The teachers that I kind of enjoy are the teachers that…love their job, and then there's the fact that they also want to push you to do your best no matter what it takes. Like if it takes staying after school for an hour studying, they're willing to do that, and it just makes me really happy to see that they want the best for their students. They want them to do their absolute best.

Trevor (Focus Group 1), however, gave the most extensive statement about student-teacher interaction. Like Ella and Jane, he spoke of how important it is for teachers to relate to and
respect their students, but also included examples of how positive relationships with teachers can impact students’ lives in the future:

And I honestly also think teachers…don't know how much of an impact they actually make on a student's life. Because they need to teach a subject and teach it well because you have a kid for one year but imagine how much of your life and how much of your time is put into school. Like, through your whole entire life. Just getting to one profession or if you haven't decided what that profession is, like figuring it out. And how much teachers can actually help you with that and they can be really bad teachers and then there could be really good teachers that can make you more interested in the subject and actually kind of feel what the student feels.

Trevor made clear that the very best teachers are able to blend learning with positivity, and he projected the influence of this potent blend into the future. Overall, these responses show the variety of ways that teachers can have a positive emotional impact on students—from creating an enjoyable classroom environment, to modeling respect and positivity, and making personal connections with students. This shows that positivity transferred to the students in many ways, and that teachers impacted these students beyond simply learning content or skills.

Positive Emotions and Choice Based Projects

The students used the term “project” on their own to summarize a particular type of schoolwork, specifically a long-term assignment where they created a poster, model, writing piece, or other product to demonstrate their learning. Such assignments are more active, hands-on, and open-ended than typical assignments. Increased student choice was often a characteristic of project-based learning for these students and was a natural extension of students’ explanations of why they enjoy this type of academic work. This was the third highest occurring positive emotion theme (n=35), coming in just below positive interactions with teachers (n=37).
The most illustrative examples of this theme came from the eighth grade groups. Group 1 and Group 2 offered the highest total of responses showing this theme with 13 and 10 respectively, quite outpacing the other groups. The “choice” aspect stood out the most in their responses to the point that their meaning of the term “project” equated with an assignment in which they could choose a topic within their interest and control what form the outcome or final product took. Trevor from Group 1 simply stated, “Projects with choice,” when asked about what he enjoys at school. Julia said as much as well, but offered a contrast between two different classes to illustrate her point:

It's also like during science, when we're not allowed to listen to music but we're doing a lab or something I'm kind of distracted, not really paying attention because music really helps me focus so when we're in ELA doing our individual things, I'm doing a writing project or something like that. I get really into it when I'm listening to music and I can do what I want and kind of roll with it.

Two common reference points for the eighth grade students were “Hour” projects—Genius Hour and Historian Hour. Genius Hour is based on a Google workplace philosophy in which employees were given time each week to work on a creative project of their choice, such as developing a new app, outside of their normal duties for Google. Teachers have recently adopted this idea for the classroom to give students time each week, usually one class period, to pursue their interests and passions. In this case, the regular ELA classes had completed a Genius Hour project on solving a social issue while the “Challenge” ELA class (CHELA) had not. All the students had experience with Historian Hour, a choice- and interest-based project given every quarter in social studies. It was clear in the way the students referred to these projects that they represented an ideal of what project-based learning should provide. For example, Julia stated,

I like more hands-on stuff too so that's really fun and that's what I enjoy about school but also like in ELA when we're doing our Genius Hour, kind of getting to do what I want to do and having more of a choice in those kind of projects make me more excited and enjoy school.
Allison contrasted her CHELA class with the regular ELA classes in a rather complex set of connections:

I kind of wish we could do something like that because I enjoyed Historian Hour the second time we did it. Not really the first time because I felt it was more a, ‘You have to do it this way,’ but I just liked the fact that we kind of got our own...We got to do basically whatever we wanted that was within the topic...It was a broad topic so it was pretty simple to find something. So I liked it because I did something that I was super-passionate about.

In her response Allison lamented that the CHELA class did not do a Genius Hour project, and she contrasted it to the second quarter Historian Hour project in which the students were allowed to have more freedom than the first time they were assigned it. Julia also elaborated on this topic, and she returned to it by responding to Allison:

Yeah, that's what I like is when teachers are more free willing...They'll give you something and then they'll let you do what you want to do with it. Like with Historian Hour or Genius Hour, you guys kind of gave us this time and place where we want this done at this time but you can do what you want in between these two time points and it gave us more of a free will, like ‘Oh, I'm gonna be busy so I can do this. Or I can spend this time in class doing this but also doing another thing’.

Like Allison, Julia referred to these projects as ideal examples of being given “free will” within an assignment. This became a common talking point in subsequent groups as well. Logan from Group 2 stated,

I enjoy projects only if they're fun. If the teachers try to make it fun and not boring for the students, I think that's a good way for people to learn and makes them want to do more and make them enjoy it a lot...Kind of like Genius Hour, if we do whatever we want. We can research whatever we enjoy by ourselves or what we like to see or do. Then I think that's a good way to help kids learn and make it fun for them.

Two students from Group 3 made final references to the Hour projects. Samantha offered,

I like Historian Hour or special Genius Hour because even though it is big, it does take time, and still you have the freedom to choose what you want to learn, what you're interested in and it’s not taking from the lesson. [It’s not] just, ‘Do a project on this topic,’ and it’s so boring, but [with those projects] you get to choose what you want to do and I think that's good for teenagers to be able to have that freedom.
Clay jumped in to concur with Samantha, “Adding on to what [Samantha] said about the Historian Hour. That's actually pretty fun, because you get to learn more about the project that you're doing that you don't really know a whole lot about.”

Other students spoke about positive emotions and projects in more general terms or used different references than the Hour projects. Taylor from Group 2 remarked,

I usually find school enjoyable when I'm able to do what I want to do. Like the projects, you have the freedom to do whatever you want, or during research things, you're allowed to research who you want or what you want.

Nate supported Taylor’s assertion: “I agree with [Taylor]. Most of the time, I just like it when a certain project ... Like freedom granted to you to do whatever you want.” From the same group, Alyssa gave a somewhat less explicit statement about projects but with the same sentiment: “Writing about books is fun when you give your personal opinion.” The implication here is that writing fits the parameters of a project, and opinions are clearly personal choices. From Group 3, Amira continued this commonality on choice-based projects and included her own example:

When we're given a project, especially if it's a big project, I believe that we should be able to have a little bit of leeway on what format, what type of product we can do whether is a poster, a presentation, a diorama. And then also, on the subject, Ms. [E] had a good example of that when we did the 90 second presentations. So we had to make a quick Google presentation on one of these six topics which are all in the same ballpark, but they're different.

Here, Amira used “leeway,” much like Julia used “free will,” as her own synonym for choice.

In a final example, seventh grader Jackson (Focus Group 6) gave a statement about an individualized writing project in which he chose to explore astronomy:

In ELA we are making essay about a topic that we chose. So I chose something that really fascinates me which is astronomy, so I thought about what I could do with that and I thought maybe I can make an essay about how telescopes work. So I learned a lot of things in the span of two weeks that also is helping me in science. I studied things about microscopes. So what I'm doing in science I already know because I have things on the research and also because of that I now have the ability to find out any magnification of any single objective on the microscope.
What is most clear in this collection of responses is the degree to which these students valued the opportunity projects gave them for autonomy over their schoolwork, that such opportunities produced several variations of positive emotional responses, and that in each case the students clearly referred to a project-based experience. Choice and student autonomy in general as a source of positive emotions will be further detailed later in this chapter.

Positive Emotions and Creativity

The reason to separate projects and creativity into two separate themes was necessary given that “projects” and “creativity” encapsulated two different meanings and contexts in how the students used the terms, even though they are often closely linked in instructional design. In Creativity (1996), a follow-up book to Flow in which Csikszentmihalyi examines connections between flow states and the creative process, the author contends that creativity is “a central source of meaning in our lives” (p.1). The students strongly supported this in the way that many of them answered the opening focus group question: “Please say your name and tell us a little bit about yourself, especially the kinds of things you enjoy doing and want to work hard on.” This question was clearly intended to be an ice-breaker that captured an important statement from the students and also foreshadowed what would be further discussed over the course of the meeting. Most of the total responses for the creativity theme were revealed by this one question. Fifteen of the total 34 participants (44%) mentioned a particular creative pursuit that inspired hard work and enjoyment, with art, drawing, music, writing, dance, and theater given as examples. These are just the clearest examples from the students of activities commonly considered to be creative; Csikszentmihalyi would argue there is creativity involved in science and math as well. Creativity
ranked fourth overall in total occurrences for positive emotions (n=32), with Focus Group 2 having the highest number out of the total (n=9), and every group had at least three occurrences.

Creativity was a subtext for many parts of the focus group discussions. Beyond the first question, many students returned to the concept as a source of enjoyment or a vital component of worthwhile schoolwork by sharing direct statements about its importance to them. For instance, Julia (Focus Group 1) stated, “And then Genius Hour is just like I'm writing a book but also incorporating my art with it so it really gets me interested and excited.” Though the project provided the medium, Julia’s interest and excitement were clearly linked to the creativity she was allowed to pursue through art and writing. Similarly, Amira (Focus Group 3) gave a longer statement about enjoying a particular project but offered this specific viewpoint on creativity: “And also, just my preference, I personally love projects where I can put creativity in, which is fairly easy because... Like posters, Google slides, dioramas. I love making those cuz they're so much fun. Comparatively, Molly (Focus Group 2) responded, “Whenever there's creative writing, I find that enjoyable. And art related issues.” Taylor followed with, “And like what [Molly] said, creative writing, because I enjoy writing a lot, and so I've really enjoyed just being able to do what I want to do and how it helps me actually learn.” Later in the same meeting, Alyssa made an even stronger statement about opportunities to be creative at school: “Yes about school being worthwhile, but a very small part of it is worthwhile. And that's mainly the art stuff, because that's all relevant. However, the rest, it's not relevant.”

A final group of students within this theme contended that creativity inspired not just enjoyment but concerted effort and extended focus as well. Maggie from Group 4 stated, “Oh and Art classes. You put a lot of work into your different types of art that you make and then it usually pays off and you're happy about it.” Celeste (Focus Group 5) offered a similar sentiment:
I always say... I like to draw too. So I like the stuff where we have to draw 'cause sometimes I go overboard...I actually hand-drew a butterfly for a butterfly project while everyone else used the cutouts that our teacher gave.

Celeste enjoyed creativity at such a degree that such opportunities caused her to “go overboard” with her effort. Jane (Focus Group 7) shared a similar perspective on writing assignments: “In my personal experiences, I mean I like writing when I really get a writing subject, or when I really get like a writing project, I'm all over it.”

Creativity clearly held an important meaning in these students’ lives. They viewed assignments that included creative components as opportunities to enjoy their schoolwork. Such assignments inspired enjoyment and happiness, interest, and hard work—all essential positive emotional components of optimal engagement.

Positive Emotions and Sports or Physical Activity

The Creativity and Sports or Physical Activity themes shared a few similarities. Like creativity, many people enjoy sports or physical activity to such an extent that these pursuits become a part of their identity. Likewise, most of the occurrences of this theme were in response to the first question about what inspired enjoyment and hard work for the students in general. In fact, more students mentioned athletics than creativity in response to this question—19 of the 34 (56%). Their responses showed a wide variety of possible physical activities with which to self-identify: dance, running, basketball, soccer, football, hockey, softball, volleyball, riding dirt bikes, playing outside, martial arts, gymnastics, and cheerleading. The specific activities are not as important since a different sample of students would likely show a different collection of activities. But the importance lies in that over half the participants connected physical activity with enjoyment and hard work.
The students did not return to this topic as much as others over the subsequent course of the focus group discussions, but there were still some notable statements. Focus Group 3 had the highest number of responses with this theme (n=7), which was intriguing given that the students in Group 4 were organized around “Athletics” because of similarities in their survey responses. From Focus Group 3, responding to a question about happiness in school, Amira said, “Or in gym class. You're running around and stuff, playing games, talk to your friends. It’s not like in math class, where you have to pay attention the whole time.” She drew a distinct contrast between a class with more physical activity and a core class with more seat work. In responding to the same question, Cameron (Focus Group 4) shared a similar perspective. He stated, “During gym,” and when asked about other classes, he responded, “Not really.” Side discussions arose in some focus group meetings contrasting middle school with elementary school. Within one of these discussions, Ella declared,

I liked elementary school because it wasn't that much of a workload but we also got breaks, like recess. We got to go outside for 20 minutes or play in the snow during the day, then come have lunch and then go back to class for a while.

Physical education class offered such breaks in middle school, but perhaps not as frequently as Ella would have preferred. Lily (Focus Group 7) made this connection as well and stated, “I really like gym, because you're basically just not sitting at one place for so long. It's basically a recess, I could say.”

Beyond physical education, students made comparisons between their core classes and exploratory classes as well. Much like how projects represented increased opportunities for choice and creativity for these students, exploratory classes represented times when students were allowed to be more physically active and hands-on. For example, Celeste (Focus Group 5) explained how her choir class involved physical movement:
It was like ... 'cause you were singing and you were using your entire body to ... you were standing up. I remember when our choir teacher last year was literally [making] us do plank holds while singing. And lunges. And jumping jacks. So we were awake in the morning.

From Focus Group 7, Ava stated, “I enjoy choir and gym, because we're not just sitting at a desk doing stuff.” Anali, from the same group as Ava, remarked, “I like the exploratories, like trying different things. Like in industrial arts, we did a CO2 car like cutting out wood, and that was pretty cool.”

These various examples show how physical activity can take many forms throughout a school day beyond playing games or working out in physical education. These students made clear connections between enjoyment and physical activity, whether it was a chosen athletic pursuit with which to self-identify or simply being given an opportunity in a class to be active.

Real World Interest

Shernoff’s (2013) definition of engagement includes elevated interest as an essential positive emotional component. The source of interest however can be difficult to ascertain because it is not always clear if a student’s current level of interest leads to engagement in an activity, or if the activity itself creates interest, or if it is a both/and relationship. Some of these middle school students spoke about teachers creating interest for them, but in those cases the source of the positive emotion was clearly the interaction with the teacher. Students also spoke quite frequently about being allowed choice through their schoolwork. In those cases it could be assumed that students enjoyed making choices based on their interests, but as a thematic pattern their explanations showed more focus on the allowed choices leading to positive emotions. However, there was another group of students who clearly connected interest as a positive
emotion to assignments or subject areas that had clear connections to the real world—whether it was current events, modern society or culture, or the benefits of academics on their future academic or career paths (n=25). These responses would seem to demonstrate Newmann’s (1992) criteria of authentic instruction as a prerequisite for engagement. Focus Groups 1 and 6 tied for the highest number of responses with this theme (n=7).

Some of the eight grade students spoke quite extensively about classes that provided clear connections to real world events or issues. From Focus Group 1, Julia explained,

I like school because History this year has gotten me really into paying attention to things more. Like more watching the news, kind of having my own opinions on things, kind of standing with those opinions. And also with ELA when we did debates and stuff. It got me more on finding support for those opinions and just kind of backing up the certain things that I thought didn't really matter and I didn't really care about.

During the same meeting, Evan also made a clear statement about History and its real world connections:

I honestly think that for History, we should obviously learn about it but I don't know if we should get a grade or a GPA counting for it because the reason for History is so we don't repeat the events. So we actually know what happened and what the mistakes were.

Additionally, Nate (Focus Group 2) shared a response similar to Julia and Nate’s about the same History class:

I feel like his class had more of a worksheet where we weren't just analyzing every little last detail, that we would rather focus on, okay, how could this be used today? What does this relate to us? How can we as civilians incorporate this into our life? Because that's going to be more important than just knowing it.

Furthermore, Allison made a similar connection to real world issues by referring to a specific topic from the same History class:

When we were learning about the Israeli and Palestinian war and the Afghanistan war… I'm really into learning about wars and stuff so it was kind of my forte where I went home and me and my dad were having this long conversation about it and then also when we were doing the McNamara thing, my dad's always been really wanting to watch
documentaries about it. And so I went into telling him more about it and then he'd tell me some things I didn't know and then we'd go into John F. Kennedy and it was just kind of like History really gets me going on explaining things and basing my opinions and seeing what other people think and then kind of agreeing but disagreeing.

Real world interest was especially crucial for Allison, as she shared a few more thoughts related to her Historian Hour project:

Historian hour really got me going on that one because I did it on the Boston Marathon Bombing. And I had background knowledge on it but going in and watching news articles about it and watching all these things about it and reading about it ... I just couldn't believe a lot of things that happened, compared to other things... And that's what I love most about History. After a day of being in there...when we're learning about something and I know about it, I feel so prepared to go home and talk about it, like show that I actually know what I'm saying.

She later clarified, “So that was really cool for me because I was ... I considered myself as part of that because I was near that time.”

Similar to Allison feeling “a part” of her assignment based on its relevance to current events, Nate (Focus Group 2) also shared needing to feel personally connected to schoolwork:

“Well, I like going to school when I feel like I belong to the subject, just like I like what I'm doing and I know what I'm doing, how I understand it.” Evan gave a similar response to Nate’s, but in the context of a realization he had while watching a TV show:

I learned an interesting fact that I never really thought of. So I was watching this show and it's like, the reason why we learn all this stuff is not because you're always asking yourself, ‘When are we gonna use this in real life?’ and then because they said that it's problem solving. You're gonna come across a lot more problems than you do in school and then you need to figure out what you're going to do and actually solve it even if it doesn't have to do with a certain just one subject, it might have to do with a couple.

To Two seventh grade students from Focus Group 7, school made them feel personally connected to the real world by helping them appreciate their communities. Makayla shared, “Yes. I think it's important because then you can learn more about... Like to help your community, and like learn what's going on,” while Lily offered, “I think it's worth it because you
can learn things basically like about your community that you didn't know, and some things, like a library was a school once or something like that. Pretty cool.”

To the largest group of students who responded within this theme, the “When are we gonna use this in real life?” question was answered by connecting schoolwork to their future careers. Allison already knew what she career she wanted, and that drove her interest in certain subject areas:

When I'm older I've already decided I kind of ... I want to be a pilot and for the Air Force. I want to go into Police Academy department stuff like that. So I find History important and I find Math important, because I also kind of wanted to go into that Air Force engineer type thing.

Focus Group 6 had seven total responses with this theme because the group members shared several shorter statements about the importance of academics as job preparation. Morgan offered, “I think it's important cuz you have to learn things, when you go off on your own,” while Kate said, “And without school you're not really value to your society. You're in nothing because you can't work or do anything.” Moreover, Grace claimed, “You have to be of value to your society,” along with, “I feel like if there wasn't school, it'd be harder to get a job and support your family and everything,” and, “Of course very important to me because I wanna be a family lawyer when I get older.” Jackson explained, “The more education you have, the more honor you have in society, saying like, oh, because I went to college for this, I can go into some jobs about this certain topic.” In a final example from Group 6, Maya shared her thoughts on how certain rules and requirements in school may actually help students build good habits for later in life:

I feel like it is important for teachers to enforce the fact that things need to be turned in on time because in real life like this is real life, when you go get a job and you have a deadline, there's always...In the future world, there's not always going to be [someone] like that...You might be in a strict office where everything has to be done by a certain time and I feel like it's preparation.
Two more seventh grade students from Focus Group 7 shared thoughts on job preparation as well and were able to make connections to future happiness. Anali predicted,

    A good education is crucial to getting a job that you would enjoy. I think now, since we're teenagers and that we're in middle school, we don't really understand how important it is, but it definitely is important when we go to college and we want to get accepted into our college that we want to go to. And whether you want to be like a businessperson or like a pro athlete, you still need that common knowledge that everyone has.

In addition, Lily made a similar statement about success in school leading to obtaining a desirable job:

    I think a good education is like the key to getting the job that you want, because you have to go out for the job and know what you have to be doing. Like if you don't have good education, you'll be working at a drive-thru.

Job preparation was a common topic across two more eighth grade focus groups as well. From Focus Group 4, Maggie foresaw,

    And once you would be at the age where you need to get a job, you're going to be really behind on a lot of things if you don't go to school and learn the things you need to learn. Because everything that we learn at school, we can use it for something later on that we're going to do with a career.

Comparable to Focus Group 6, eighth grade students in Group 5 shared several succinct statements on this topic. Jon declared, “I wanna be a teacher when I grow up so school is more important to me than gymnastics or other things like that because to me I'm gonna be using those skills further on,” while Joseph concurred, “Yeah, I agree entirely. There's certain types of skills you're gonna have to know for certain jobs. Not all of it's gonna apply but sometimes it will.” Danielle predicted about certain subject areas,

    I agree because certain jobs you're gonna need certain skills for maybe one job you need to have a lot of math skills so you really want to make sure you know all that or certain science skills or history skills that you're gonna need.
Finally, Celeste projected the importance of school well into the future: “I would say yes because it has a long-lasting effect on you until you're 70 because you're gonna use the skills you're using today to help you on later. Like working habits and studying habits for college and jobs.”

It is clear to these students that distinct connections to real world issues and benefits fostered their interest level in school, much like being offered the chance to be creative or control the outcome of a choice-based project did for other students. While it may not always be clear where interest comes from or what may interest a particular student, it is clear that students must be able to personally connect to authentic instruction. This authenticity can take many forms, and shows yet another way that engagement is dependent on an individual student’s perspective.

Positive Emotions and Student Autonomy

In a previous set of theme responses (Positive Emotions and Choice-Based Projects) many of these middle school students elaborated specifically on how project-based learning fostered their enjoyment because of the autonomy they were allowed to have over the final form their projects took. Beyond that specific context though, many responses indicated additional contexts for how increased levels of student autonomy can cultivate positive emotions in other contexts. This theme occurred 20 times over the course of the focus group discussions and was particularly important to Focus Group 1 (n=9).

A few students made general statements about choice in response to questions about happiness in school. For example, when asked what makes schoolwork enjoyable, Evan (Focus Group 1) stated, simply, “More of a choice,” while Alyssa (Focus Group 2) and Cameron (Focus Group 4) gave very similar statements, respectively: “And when I get to do whatever I want,” and, “I like science class. How we're able to do what we want.” Other students made comparable
statements but elaborated more. During the Focus Group 1 meeting, Trevor, Allison, and Evan shared that it was more enjoyable when teachers were not as direct about behavior and what type of work should be done. Trevor began with, “I usually feel happy when we're just doing that [which] allows us to do what we want to do or when we don't have to sit and watch and be still.” Meanwhile, Allison felt that teachers should treat every class differently based on the individual student’s needs:

Because they will all be different and so if you could alter it for every single class and every single group of kids then that would probably help us all a lot because…we're all very opinionated people...I feel like we'd get more into things.

Evan also supported the idea of teachers allowing options for students. In responding to what makes school enjoyable, he said,

Maybe having a new chapter or lesson and then having a choice. Because normally they're a broad topic; it's like, ‘Hey, do you want to learn about this,’ and then they gave you a worksheet to pick from to run topics or research.

Correspondingly, he also offered further views on enjoyment and autonomy in a group work setting:

There are times that you meet someone else and it is like, ‘Hey’ and you guys connect really well and that's how you make new friends but I think that should be left up to the person to decide if they want to venture out and actually choose a different partner.

Two students spoke of positive emotions and student autonomy in the context of the pace at which they were allowed to work. Zoey (Focus Group 4) declared, “I also like how some teachers will give you the task and you have a certain amount of time to complete it. Just your own timeline you can do.” Similarly, Jackson (Focus Group 6) from the seventh grade explained, “For me, in Science, 'cause I can go at my own pace. But I can't go at my own pace such as [having to] proceed with the rest of the class when I already know everything.”
A few of the Focus Group 5 members had an exchange in which they supported their views on enjoyment and student autonomy with examples of flexible seating in classrooms.

Celeste began with,

I know my ELA teacher does this. Whenever we're doing work, she allows us to move anywhere in the classroom. We can sit on the floor, on the rug, in the corner of her classroom. Or sit on the back table. We don't have to be confined to our desk unless we're doing some group work or something like that.

Jon followed Celeste, “That's how Mr. [E] is a lot, cuz he has those podiums that are all around that we're allowed to sit up there cuz we have them on there as long as we're doing our work.”

Drew completed the group explanation:

There's some teachers that let you sit wherever you want. But when you get to class you have to start out at these desks and if they let you go, say, on a beanbag if they have one. They just let you go there.

The three evidently shared the view that preferential seating led to a more positive classroom atmosphere. Nina had evoked the same idea during the previous focus group meeting and was even more direct about the emotional benefits of flexible seating:

I like classes better when we get to choose where we sit and how we work, because in certain classes we come in and sit down and you get right to work and it's not as fun. I feel like it's more fun when we can be loose and still get work done, but also talk to people we want to at the same time.

A final group of respondents within this theme used language that connected their classroom environments with basic American ideals, suggesting that increased student autonomy equaled nothing less than an encapsulation of students’ rights. For example, Joseph (Focus Group 5) referred to a teacher he had the previous school year in this way:

Seventh grade was probably the best because I had [Ms. A] and she had a lot of freedom for us. She would let us do pretty much whatever. She still taught us, [but] we had more freedom in her class than others.
Similarly, Trevor from Focus Group 1 gave a response that emphasized “freedom” but connected it to group work:

I also enjoy group stuff where we can pick what we want to do… I just feel like when you have more freedom it's more fun because you're working on what you want to work on instead of what a teacher's telling you that you have to do because that's what they want.

During the same discussion, Julia gave examples of what “free will” looks like to her in a classroom:

And kind of just free willing and also the teachers that let you do what you need to do to focus. Like listening to music, or if you need to move, or sit by people, just kind of that kind of thing.

She later returned to this idea and gave an example of an enjoyable assignment that involved self-expression and democratic processes:

I'll be in class and I'll write down something and then I start getting onto a rant about it and just really going at it and it's like that makes me happy because that class I can really express myself because I always have these debates with people and I always have my facts supported and all.

Comparatively, Amira (Focus Group 3) was even clearer about a specific right she expected to be able to exercise while at school. She alluded, “I feel like the ideal classroom environment would be one that is not super strict. You have freedom of speech. That is a right.”

This final group made a plain connection: individuals with increased agency and voice are more likely to positively engage with their surroundings. Though most of the students were perhaps unaware of the analogy, there is a definite comparison to a more open, choice-based classroom and American society. Just like how allowing for individual rights in a democracy is meant to positively engage citizens in their government, increased student autonomy had the same effect for these students and their schoolwork.
A final group of middle school students within the positive emotion themes explained how they found enjoyment through extended effort, attention, or focus. Though students may have referred to increased effort or focus within other theme categories, such as creativity or projects, responses within this theme were direct statements of extended hard work or attention in the context of interesting or enjoyable schoolwork. This follows Shernoff’s (2013) flow theory model of engagement in which high levels of enjoyment, interest, and concentration occur simultaneously because an individual’s skills are in sync with the level of challenge presented to them. While it is difficult to confirm whether or not these students actually experienced flow—the highest degree of engagement a person can reach—it does show that school work for these middle school students was both enjoyable and challenging, the very combination that defines optimal engagement. While these middle school students were asked specifically about flow sensations in their survey responses, they were not asked flow-specific questions during the focus group meetings. This was the lowest occurring discernible positive emotions theme (n=17), with Focus Group 4 having the highest number out of the seven groups (n=6).

The students spoke of this combination of positive emotions and focus in various ways. For example, Logan (Focus Group 2) explained,

I enjoy projects only if they're fun. If the teachers try to make it fun and not boring for the students, I think that's a good way for people to learn and makes them want to do more and make them enjoy it a lot. And just doing fun stuff in school, that just makes me enjoy it ten times more.

Logan clearly expressed positive emotions, and how these feelings make students “want to do more,” a phrase that seemed to refer to increased effort and focus. Julia (Focus Group 1) made a similar statement: “Yeah, I feel tired and then sometimes I get this burst of energy when I'm
doing something I really like and I start actually getting really into it and focusing a lot more.”

Again, the connection between increased focus following interest or enjoyment is clear even if a specific context would be more definitive. Likewise, Clay (Focus Group 3) referred to his Historian Hour project and said, “I over-do it. But it’s fun ‘cause I only over-do it if I enjoy it.”

What “over-do” meant to Clay was slightly ambiguous, but seemed to refer to a high level of effort and focus. Comparably, Zoey (Focus Group 4) hinted, “I guess it's also fun sometimes to reach a certain amount of focus sometimes.” She later clarified, “I also think if it's fun and I'm looking forward to doing it, it's something I'm interested in, then I'll work harder.”

Zoey acknowledged that her interest level was a key factor in whether or not she enjoyed an assignment and was willing to work hard on it, and this was a key component of other responses within this theme. Maggie (Focus Group 4 explained,

“I just feel like I try to work hard on everything, like equally hard about everything, but sometimes I just feel like the more I want to work on it, the more hard I work on it…I'll find myself wanting to work more on something that is more fun or interesting to me than something that is not.

Here, Maggie draws a distinction between whether a topic or assignment is interesting or not and how that affected the effort and attention she devoted to her schoolwork. Maggie had referred to art as a class that inspired this level of engagement, and her fellow focus group members Nina and Celeste gave examples of certain classes as well. Nina said, “Well this is more, it's not a core class, but in gym, I don't know. I enjoy it a lot more than other classes so I work harder in gym.”

For Celeste, this occurred in a much different setting:

“I feel like when you're in choir, you have to think about what your notes are next and what you're doing next, cuz that's also hard work cuz you have to know ahead of time and it's also really fun because I just enjoy it.
For Anali and Lily from Focus Group 7, this combination of enjoyment and hard work happened in the context of certain types of assignments. Anali explained, “I'll work hard and I'm good at writing essays, so I guess that makes it more enjoyable since I know how to do it,” while Lily said, “We had to do a poster in history, and I tried really hard on it and got a good grade on it.”

Maya and Kate (Focus Group 6) each gave explanations of past writing projects in which interest and enjoyment led to extended hard work. Maya recalled,

Last year our class, our ELA class collectively joined a Letters Spell Literature contest. We had to write a letter to an author who inspired you and if you won the state then you got to go to Springfield and read your letter in front of the Secretary of State and you won $200. So there was like a lot at stake. So of course I worked my hardest and it was probably my favorite thing because there's never really like an assignment where I really got to like share my emotions as much as I got to in that project. And I actually did end up going to state. And so there was a big payoff too. So it felt like it was one of my projects that was the most worth to do.

Maya’s example includes a monetary award and trip to the state capital as external motivators to stoke her interest, but her clearest reason for this assignment becoming her “favorite thing” and why she “worked [her] hardest” was because of the emotional connection she made with the work. Likewise, during the same focus group meeting Kate made a similar statement about a poetry assignment:

Okay. So in like fifth grade we did this project with a bunch of poems in 'em, I love writing poems. So I took a lot of time on it and it worked really hard on it because I was like my favorite project that we did all year and probably my favorite projects that I've ever done in school.

A key descriptor of flow states is that individuals become so absorbed and involved in their enjoyment of an activity that they lose track of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Many students hinted at this phenomenon in their explanations of working on assignments for an extended period of time, how their attention to an assignment or topic carried over after school, or how they did not mind the amount of work required as long as the work was enjoyable. Trevor
(Focus Group 1), however, offered a uniquely specific response in reference to a writing assignment. This statement is from Trevor’s perspective, without any prompting for specific word choice:

> It takes me a while normally to get into something so I'll start actually being excited about whatever we're working on and then the class will end so that's not fun because I'll actually be excited about it, like this happened in History a while ago. I think we were doing Historian Hour projects. I was writing my paper and I was really into it and then the period ended and I lost the flow of that. So I felt like that could have been better if I had a longer period of time to go with that flow.

Ironically, this was a complaint; Trevor was upset that his work time was interrupted by the bell. He was so absorbed in enjoying his work that he wished the period could have been extended so he could keep working.

The overall collection of responses within this theme showed that these middle school students reacted positively when presented with enjoyable and interesting academic contexts or assignments. They valued these opportunities and extended their effort and attention. Furthermore, these assignments held positive meaning for them. Trevor’s response showed not only this, but also that students may react negatively when they feel they have been deprived of chances to “go with that flow.”

Positive Emotions and Academic Contexts: Conclusion

The evidence from the focus group responses showed that positive emotions occurred in a variety of contexts for this group of middle school students. The specific academic contexts which inspired positive emotions were individualized by student; what inspired positive emotions in one student was not always the same for another. Certain contexts occurred at higher totals than others over the course of the seven focus group meetings, both by overall totals and
by each focus group. Additional research with more participants is necessary to determine if particular contexts correlate with certain demographic groups or student characteristics.
CHAPTER 6

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS—NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

If, as shown by the middle school students’ focus group responses, positive emotions resulted from particular academic contexts, it followed that such contexts existed for negative emotions as well. Given that positive emotions are a necessary prerequisite for engagement, negative emotions can hinder engagement and at the very extreme lead to disengagement from school altogether. Furthermore, each of the theories that comprise the framework for this study—flow, stage-environment fit, and control-value theory—each contend that negative emotions result when the activities and learning environments offered to students do not fit their emotional needs (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993; Pekrun, 2006). A balanced conversation about emotional engagement meant allowing the students to share all sides of this topic, with the negative counterpoint to positive affect serving as a revealing comparison.

Negative Emotions and Academic Contexts

Table 4 displays the academic contextual patterns for occurrences of negative emotions within the students’ focus group responses.
Table 4

Negative Emotions and Academic Context—Overall and Focus Group Total Occurrences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context for Negative Emotions in Academics</th>
<th>Total Occurrence</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 1</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 2</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 3</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 4</th>
<th>8th Grade Group 5</th>
<th>7th Grade Group 6</th>
<th>7th Grade Group 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boredom from Academic Settings</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress or Anxiety from Schoolwork</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity or Apathy Towards School</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules, Requirements, and Expectations</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity or Stress from Social Interaction</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Interaction with Teachers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These negative emotional contexts were prompted by several of the core focus group questions. In many cases, students responded negatively to, “How do you feel while you are at school?” and, “What effect do teachers have on how you feel while you are at school?” Also, when asked, “Is there anything about school you enjoy?” some students answered, “No,” and then supported their response with contextual examples. Just as certain questions inquired about specific positive emotions, other core questions did the same for specific negative emotions, such as boredom and stress. Given the often intertwining nature of the discussions, in some focus
groups a conversation would start on a positive emotional topic and students would offer the opposing side as a natural comparison to clarify their viewpoints. Much like enjoyment, interest and satisfaction are variations of positive emotions inspired by particular contexts, negative emotions can take on a variety of forms as well, such as displeasure, apathy, anxiety, or disinterest.

**Boredom from Academic Settings**

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) contends that boredom occurs when a person’s “skills are greater than the opportunities for using them” (p. 50), or when a person disengages from his or her environment because whatever activity is being offered is not stimulating or interesting enough to demand full attention. Though the reasons why students experience boredom are individualized as most of the foci of this study are, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen (1997) assert that some of the blame must be placed “on the way schools provide information to students” (p. 1). These middle school students supported this contention with responses indicating how boredom occurred for them in school across a range of academic settings. Importantly, this was the highest occurring negative emotion theme (n=42) and the second highest occurring in the entire study. Additionally, it was one of the more evenly distributed themes, with Focus Group 1 showing the highest number of occurrences (n=10), and every group having at least four. This supports previous research on the widespread, pervasive nature of boredom from across the learning experience (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2010).

A few students made succinct yet sweeping statements of experiencing boredom in school. Joseph (Focus Group 5) made a connection between boredom and tiredness: “Class gets pretty boring sometimes. It just depends on how you wake up and how you feel. If you wake up
and you're tired, your whole day kind of goes super slow.” From Focus Group 1, Evan also shared that school made him feel tired because, “Some of it's just boring and you don't get into it as much,” while Julia stated similarly, “Like when we're just working on our own things but we're not allowed to talk or do anything, it kind of makes me just bored and tired.” Ella (Focus Group 3) stated with general displeasure, “And then some classes are like, ‘This is boring; I hate it in here.’” Two more students drew dichotomies to make distinctions similar to Ella’s response. Danielle (Focus Group 5) disclosed, “I feel like also a lot of times it depends on what class you're in. 'Cause some classes are really boring and you don't want to be there, but some classes are really fun to be in,” while seventh grader Maya (Focus Group 6) outlined a similar division: “For different classes. It varies for me, like some classes are like fun and energetic and then others are just boring stuff.” Julia had suggested that interaction prevented boredom for her, and she also said more clearly, “So it's one of those things where I don't want to be bored just sitting here doing my work. I want to at least get a little bit of help on it.” Similar to Julia, Maggie (Focus Group 4) also connected boredom to working by herself: “Because certain topics are more overwhelming and harder to work hard on because they just are boring or not really fun to work on.” Maya also stated that working by herself was not ideal for her: “I get bored when we have to do independent work because I can very easily distract myself.”

From Focus Group 2, Logan stated similarly to the preceding evidence, “Boredom easily happens with me, so it can easily come to me where I just get bored easily in class,” but then was more specific about boredom occurring when he felt class activities were not varied enough:

They keep doing the same thing, like they keep giving us like...Okay, worksheet, test, worksheet, test, worksheet, test. That gets me bored easily. Like, okay, I don't want to do this anymore. Can we do something different?
Molly concurred,

Yeah, I agree with [Logan] about the whole repetition thing, because last year in my history class, it'd be, ‘Read this chapter, fill this worksheet, we have a quiz.’ And it was really that the whole entire year… I think they need to change things up, because repetition is easy, but it's not what's going to have you learn the best way.

Further responses showed that students became bored because of too much repetition or a lack of variety in class activities. From Focus Group 3, Owen proclaimed,

I really hate it when you just read out of the book the whole time, but one of those big textbooks. If you're in ELA and you're reading a book, well that's fine. But if you just like sit there, read out of a textbook, it’s kind of boring. And some textbooks are kind of interesting but for the most part it’s just boring. It’s bland. It’s very vague. It’s just not that engaging in itself to learn.

Samantha agreed with Owen, and shared, “Basically what you said, and I think also with you where it’s like, the textbook, like if you're always reading out of a textbook it can be boring.”

During the Focus Group 5 discussion, Drew shared that he felt boredom through repetition if he felt he already grasped the material: “But if I understand something and then we work on it the next day I feel bored because I already understand it. It's just a waste of time.”

To Alyssa (Focus Group 2), particular classes were sources of boredom because of the lack of variety and too much repetition:

The classes that are very easy for me to get bored in are science, math, social studies, and sometimes ELA. And social studies, it's because, like we said, we're doing the same thing over and over again, only it's not CERs, it's worksheets about history, which are very repetitive. Because last quarter, I think the only homework we had were all these quizzes that you had to read, go through the quiz, and it went on for very, very long. And I have to say, I got pretty bored pretty quickly. But I can't really do anything about it.

Accordingly, Owen and Maggie shared examples particular classes that demonstrated the same point. Owen stated,

Well I had Mrs. [I] last year for history and that was basically just reading out of a textbook and going over the same thing three different ways. I never studied for that class ever. Got hundreds every time because she went over everything like...Okay so we had to
read it, then we had to do a paper on it, then she gave us a lecture about it. So there were three different opportunities for you to get the material in. So there was no need to study, cuz it was already drilled inside your head. But most of the days, it’s like, ‘I already know what this is. Please stop.’

Then Maggie explained during the Focus Group 4 meeting,

I usually feel bored in history... Sometimes I just feel like it's just papers being handed out to you and they're just telling you to read it and fill out these answers. I feel like nothing major is sticking, and we keep covering the same spot, but it's not enough where it's going to stick, if that makes any sense.

A few other students attributed boredom to specific classes or subjects but not as extensively as Alyssa, Owen, or Maggie. From Focus Group 5, Celeste stated simply about her Science class, “It’s very dull in there,” while Danielle shared, “I also feel like ELA in the morning's really boring because it goes really slow.” From Focus Group 7, Anali said, “Yeah, so history has been boring lately, and so has one of my English classes too,” while Lily shared, “ELA is pretty boring for me, because I'm not really good at that stuff, and so when it comes down to tests and anything, I usually don't get that good of grades because it's pretty boring to me.”

If as Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen (1997) contend that boredom occurs largely because of the manner in which students are presented with information in academic settings, then much of that blame must be placed with teachers. Though many districts or buildings may dictate pedagogical choices to their educators, teachers at CFMS are largely left alone to make choices about lessons and activities themselves. However, some teachers in the building made instructional choices that disengaged rather than engaged this group of seventh and eighth grade students. Accordingly, when asked about boredom many of the middle school students explained a specific context for when it occurs for them: when teachers talk or students have to listen for too long. This was particularly unsatisfactory to the Focus Group 1 students.
Allison responded to when she feels bored at school, “Power Points,” and “Lectures,” and Evan supported her with, “I can’t handle that.” Trevor shared a few thoughts on this topic, beginning with, “I tend to lose focus when a teacher talks for an extended period of time, like before an activity or just during because that's what we're working on in class. Especially during math.” He later shared, “I feel like the most boring and fidgety times of the day are when you're just sitting there watching a teacher do something on the board or talking about something for 20 minutes and it's like, ‘Can we just do whatever we're supposed to do? Or can we do something?’” Allison jumped in again and offered,

I feel like if we were allowed to do stuff while the teacher was talking, that like at the same time if you knew that student was able to pay attention at the same time, I feel like that would help the boredom because otherwise I will just sit there and like stare at the teacher, like, ‘What are you talking about?’

Trevor then supported her with one more statement:

If a teacher talks for more than five minutes at a time, unless it's going over homework, I stop paying attention because I can't...I just can't... It's not that I can't handle the amount of information. It's just that it's so boring and some teachers kind of seem like they don't teach about what they're teaching and just sounds monotonous.

The statements about listening and boredom from the other focus group discussions were remarkably similar to those from Focus Group 1. From Focus Group 2, Logan contended, “When teachers are talking for too long...I get really bored and I start tuning them out, and I don't know what they just said. I'm just like, I don't know.” Two students from Focus Group 3 spoke about this as well. Samantha asserted,

Especially for me, if a teachers explaining something but they don't stop, they just keep explaining it, and I'm like, ‘Okay, okay,’ and then I kind of start dozing off and then I'm like, ‘Oh, she's talking.’ So it’s that type of thing.

Ella offered a slight variation on this theme within the same discussion as Samantha: “When some of the stuff we do, it’s like, okay we need to watch a documentary on how a spaceship flies
or something. And then you're like, ‘That's boring.’ They're rambling on and on and on.” Two more students from Focus Group 4 shared related thoughts. Maggie proclaimed,

When teachers just talk and talk and lecture us about random stuff that no one really cares about. [It] Isn't going to help us in any way and we all tune out like, ‘Yeah, whatever. Get to the point. We want to work on our homework that we have.’”

Responding to the same question, Zoey alleged, “I think also, just because sometimes teachers just talk, they don't do anything to show us more, just talking to us…[It’s] sometimes hard to follow.”

The seventh grade students from Focus Groups 6 and 7 also shared comparable thoughts on boredom and listening. Morgan objected, “Teachers like talking for a long time and they have this whole spiel and everyone just dozes off or start drawing on their books,” and, “Oh yeah, history is [boring] at times, he talks a lot, but I feel if we did more work…” Grace then interrupted to share an example of a particular class and teacher:

Like a lot of times I don't wanna be back like bad-mouthing Mr. [F] or anything. A lot of times in history he talks for like the whole period and that just, I mean, how long can you sit and hear somebody talk without being bored?

Morgan then continued her thought and concurred with Grace’s example: “More than just talking because it's kind of hard for me to remember what he says sometimes because he just talks so much.” From Focus Group 7, Anali stated, “But when it's like ELA or history, we just sit there and talk, or discuss about an artifact, or how to use appositives correctly. Then it gets pretty boring.” Makayla also shared her thoughts on history during the same meeting: “Especially when our teacher talks the whole, entire time. It's like, can you just give us our homework?” When posed the same question as the other students about whether or not he experiences boredom at school, Jackson (Focus Group 6) stated simply, “Too often.”
Any amount of boredom is an indicator that students are not fully engaged with their academic environments, but the evidence for this theme is perhaps some of the most distinct in the entire study. As the students’ responses show, boredom can occur for a range of avoidable reasons, such as being left alone to work too often or a lack of variety in how information is conveyed. Unequivocally, to some of the middle school students having to sit and listen for an extended period of time was not the most effective way to engage them in the material, and in fact caused disengagement. The effects of unintentionally creating boredom in an academic environment can be damaging since bored students may “have trouble mustering enough psychic energy to cope with the environment, let alone pursue goals that will increase their skills” (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, p. 21). The implications for this amount of boredom occurring for these students will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Stress or Anxiety from Schoolwork

The second highest occurring negative emotional academic context that occurred during focus group discussions, and third highest occurring theme in the entire study, was stress or anxiety from schoolwork (n=41). This theme most often occurred in students’ responses to, “Do you ever feel stressed out or anxious at school? Why?” However, students also invoked stress and anxiety on their own responding to questions about teachers and how they felt at school. Just as students were asked about enjoyment at school, it was important to inquire specifically about stress because of its direct relationship to disengagement with an activity. According to flow theory, anxiety results when a person feels that the challenge of an activity is too difficult—meaning high skills are required but a person does not possess the skill level to meet the challenge (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). Furthermore, control value
theory posits that students experience negative emotions if an academic task seems too difficult and they do not feel as though they have control over the outcome (Pekrun, 2006). Some control-value theory studies have shown stress or anxiety as the highest occurring negative emotion (Pekrun, Goetz, & Titz, 2002). In this case the terms stress and anxiety were used in conjunction to help students separate how an academic context may make them feel temporarily with the ongoing anxiety diagnosed as a mental health issue. That is, the questions were not meant to inquire about whether students struggled with ongoing anxiety, but whether or not particular academic situations caused them to feel stressed or anxious in the moment.

The students’ responses showed a few variations of how stress or anxiety may result in the context of schoolwork. Some students made general statements about this theme, such as Logan (Focus Group 2), who shared, “I generally feel, a lot of the times stressed about homework, tests. I think it's a lot for every student.” During the same meeting, Taylor said, “I am usually stressed out because of all the work,” while Amira (Focus Group 3) admitted, “It causes me great stress, great, great stress…Inside and outside of school, cuz we're teenagers, so there's a lot of pressure put on us socially and with our homework.” Other students shared different examples of individualized issues with schoolwork and stress. For two students, Ava and Molly, this theme was subject-specific. Ava (Focus Group 7) said,

Math usually makes me anxious because, back in elementary school, I asked a teacher for help, and she told me she didn't have time for me. So basically ever since then, I've basically had a hard time with math.

Meanwhile for Molly (Focus Group 2) math was a source of calm while another subject caused her stress:

I'm usually calm when I'm at school, depending on what subject I'm in. Because when I'm math, I'm calm because I understand the concept of this. But then again, in science I'm
almost freaking out because I don't get any of it. It usually depends on what class I'm in and what my grades would be.

Joseph (Focus Group 5) also made a general statement about stress occurring when faced with difficult assignments: “It's also easier when you know what to do. Sometimes there's harder stuff and you don't all the way get it and it just stresses you out and you just get tired from it.”

Another group of students shared experiences with stress and tests. Jane (Focus Group 7) shared the following regarding test anxiety:

I mean I feel stressed and anxious every time I take a test, because I'm scared I'm going to get a bad grade and my grade's just going to fall down low. And I feel like if I get a bad grade on anything, I'm sabotaging the good grade I got before.

For Clay (Focus Group 3), test anxiety resulted from not being given enough time to prepare:

Some teachers, they can be stressful on students. They can give them stress. If they tell you you only have one night to study for a test and it’s a pop quiz or something, it puts a lot of stress on the kid or all the students if you haven't been studying each night. So then everyone just gets all freaked out and they don't know what to do, so then they just start panicking.

During the same meeting, Amira recalled about studying time, “I was waiting for someone to say something. Where they say, ‘Oh you don't need to study this, you've been working hard, I'm going to give you a break,’ and then they're like, “Oh, but here's a packet, oh, but here's this."

Accordingly, Drew (Focus Group 5) offered,

I'd say the same thing about tests and due dates. When they're really close and you're scrambling to get it done. It makes you stressed because you're not gonna get a good grade and it's gonna be sloppy and no time is gonna be put into it so then it just makes you stressed 'cause no time left to get it done.

Similar to Amira and Drew, other students spoke about tests within the larger picture of multitasking and having too many academic tasks to worry about at once. While on the same topic as Drew, Danielle explained,
I feel like when you have a really big test but it's not expected... They just told you, ‘You have a test tomorrow, study for it, do whatever you need.’ That's really hard because you didn't know...You have no time in advance to be able to start studying for it. Stuff like that makes it really hard. And then when they pile a bunch of homework on you in math or something, but then you'll also get a bunch of homework in social studies, a bunch of packets and all the stuff in science but they all expect you to finish it in one day and have it all perfect and turned in the next day.

Nina and Maggie had a short exchange on stress and multitasking during the Focus Group 4 meeting. Nina stated, “If you have multiple tests in either a day or in a week, where they're all back-to-back type thing,” and Maggie followed, “Because then you have to study and the…material gets all mixed up and you confuse classes.” Allison had (Focus Group 1) also mentioned balancing test preparations with other assignments: “And then really big projects. Like History when we get these packets and then we also have a test and then in Science we also have a test, it's just kind of stressful.”

Separate from tests, stress from multitasking between schoolwork and afterschool activities was the largest concern as source of stress for this group of middle school students. This was especially concerning for the Focus Group 1 students, who had the highest number of responses within the overall stress and schoolwork theme (n=12). Trevor shared several thoughts on multitasking, beginning with,

I feel like teachers don't, or a lot of the time, most teachers do not take into consideration that students are doing things outside school and they also need time to themselves so ... Say when you get home, you have from 3:00 to 9:30, that's six and a half hours to do your work but you also need time to unwind and do whatever you want to do.

He later continued,

You need time to eat and you need time to maybe you have after school activities that night. Like I have soccer practices on Monday nights and sometimes kids have chores to do after school. Like sometimes I made dinner for my family because my parents work late or whatever. Or I have to clean the house or something and then by the time you've done all those things there's like an hour left that you have to do homework and there's two hours of work that you have to do that's due tomorrow.
He concluded his point, “And then you'd come into school and explain that I had all this stuff and whatever. And okay, that's great, now you're gonna lose points.” Julia also spoke about balancing the demands of a History assignment with her other schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and household duties:

I was so worried that I was like, I just spent my whole time doing it and then I couldn't get my math done and it was already 1:00 in the morning and I was still doing the essay. I was like, ‘I should probably do my math,’ so then I do my Math ninth period…So I did it during lunch which was nice but all my other classes I don't and it's just very stressful. And then also I have Midknight Special on Monday and that goes until 4:00 but then I have to go home and take care of everything and do chores and stuff so I usually don't, I'm not able to do homework until 8:00 or 7:00, and that's really stressful.

Additionally, Ella shared during the Focus Group 3 meeting,

I try to keep a pretty optimistic look on life…So I usually am happy and I try not to complain about the work, although it’s very hard. But, yeah, all this homework is really taking a toll on me, mentally and physically cuz I don't get sleep between all the after school activities I have and all the homework assigned.

Furthermore, Kate (Focus Group 6) shared similar thoughts on the stress of balancing schoolwork with after-school activities: “You get homework for like all the classes. I feel stressed out because I have sports and stuff like afterschool and I don't get home until around

ninish.” Lily (Focus Group 7) was not as specific about having to multitask, but hinted that the combination of schoolwork and sports caused her anxiety:

It's nerve-wracking because if you play a sport, you can't get an F in a class or a D because then you can't play. So I'm like feeling anxiety…just waiting for my final grade to come out.

To Owen (Focus Group 3), multitasking amounted to balancing schoolwork with social concerns:

It can be very stressful just to try to keep up with being social and everything. Especially with all the schoolwork that you add in. Because that and you're taking a lot of time out after school. School takes up most of your day. There's not much time to hang out with friends anymore.
While these students implored their teachers to be more understanding of how much they had going on outside of school, others wondered why they had so much homework between their classes to worry about at once—another form of multitasking between their subject areas. Jon and Celeste confronted this issue during the Focus Group 5 meeting after their team had gone on a field trip and their teachers expected them to make up for the lost class time. Celeste began,

I feel like when all your teachers pile homework on you because... this actually happened last week... All the [X] teamers went on a field trip to the old middle school on Monday. Then when we came back we had three or four projects and a ton of homework.

Jon then followed,

Especially math homework. I feel like after the field trip Mrs. [J] started getting ... not anxious but started to get a little more grumpier... I think it's just because she was tired or something. But I feel like she started piling the lessons and lessons on us so every lesson that we did was just getting more and more homework and each time it was getting harder... I mean it's supposed to get harder ... but it was getting harder more than you'd think.

Outside of making up for lost class time, Evan (Focus Group 1) connected too much homework at once with how it affected his time after school and into the evening:

And teachers don't really talk that often about homework so you might get tons of assignments on one day and you have to like skip... One time I was working ever since I got home and I went to bed. And I had to have a late assignment because I was working so hard on the other ones and it took me the whole day and the whole night to actually get some of the assignments done.

Comparatively, Owen asserted during his focus group meeting,

All the classes from all over are all assigning at relatively the same time. I almost wish there was more of a coordination of what will be assigned when so that workloads weren’t too heavy. Cuz I remember there was one week where I had no homework and it was awesome. Then the next week, I was dying up till 11 each night working.

During the same meeting, Ella shared her difficulties with time management after school:

Like what basically all of you said, that projects and homework can be stressful because you know you got to do it, but you're like, “I wanna do other things at home,” cuz you get
out at three. I mean, obviously, it’s not like noon, so it’s like you only have a couple hours so it’s hard to find the time.

Meanwhile, Grace and Jackson offered similar stories about late nights during the Focus Group 6 meeting. Grace said, “So last night I got home at 11 and I got lucky cuz I didn't have any homework. But like usually if I have homework then I'm up till like midnight doing homework,” while Jackson shared a system he has for tricking his parents into thinking he was asleep so he could complete his homework:

I have a curfew that I have to pay attention to, so by a certain time I have to be in bed and if I don't have my homework done by that time I lie about, “Oh, I have my homework done.” I go to bed. I pretend I’m sleeping, breathing see, until my parents come up and thought I was asleep. They go to sleep, I get out of bed, I go over to my backpack, I get my homework, I finished my homework and I go back to bed.

A final group of students who responded within this theme protested about particularly stressful single assignments in which they felt the amount of time provided for them was not adequate. For example, Allison shared,

I just remembered this. This is like one of my most pet peeves is when a teacher says, ‘This whole worksheet needs to be done at the end of class,’ and then I didn't know that until halfway through class and that's just one of those things where I'm like start getting anxiety and freaking out about it.

Evan stated more generally,

That thing about homework is that I don't realize or I don't think teachers, or they might realize but like, ‘Oh, they can get it done and it should only take you like 20 minutes,’ but you don't know what the kid knows that about the actual subject so it might take an hour for one person and like two minutes for another.

During the same meeting, Julia started a lengthy exchange by recounting, “In History we had to write a paper in two days.” Allison followed, “That one was pretty annoying...That probably took like an hour on each question.” Julia then elaborated,

And I honestly thought it was a little unbelievable just because for me, my paper ended up being four pages long and that was four hours a night that I took just to write
everything out and then to rewrite everything out. So it was just, it was stressful. I didn't end up going to one of my dance classes because of it, because I was so worried about not getting it done.

Allison then jumped back in to complete the exchange:

That one got me really terrified. It was so big…We all did more than we were supposed to. He was like, ‘Don't worry that much about it, you'll be fine, it's okay.’ I went through the whole movie three times again just to get my facts down…Because they were like full-blown pages that were just blank and they had lines and it was like, ‘Fill up all these lines,’ and we were just like, ‘That's a lot of pages.’

Ella made another admission about time management regarding a particular assignment during the Focus Group 3 meeting:

When you have long assignments…it will take a long time for us to do. Sometimes we procrastinate and then don't do it and it’s really stressful because we have ten hours to do our Historian Hour that we haven't started yet.

In addition, Maggie (Focus Group 4) gave a statement similar to Ella’s:

When the teacher gives us a big project and only gives us a few days to complete it, I feel like some teachers really think about what it's like to be a student and they plan it out well, but others just say, ‘Here's the assignment. You need to complete it for me.’ It's easier when the teacher understands what we're dealing with as students and although sometimes we can be a little bit wimpy and complain a lot, we still need the proper time to complete things. Otherwise, they aren't going to get good work.

During the Focus Group 5 meeting, Celeste and Jon had another exchange in which they objected to the speed at which their math teacher moved through material. Jon began,

When she piles the lessons on us, she teaches them really fast and then some lessons are harder, she teaches them really slow. And then when we do A or B in our math books she's like, ‘Okay do A. Alright, done.’ And through that time I'm probably a quarter of the way through the first one so I feel like that's why I don't learn as well because I'm only a quarter of the way through…She just puts the answers on the board and then she moves on.

Celeste agreed,

Yeah because I don't do well any more than I used to in the beginning of the year, but that's because she goes way too fast. We learn lessons in 10 to 15 minutes, or 20 minutes.
And then we have 20 minutes to do homework and I'm like, ‘I don't know how to do any of these.’ I still don't know what the previous lesson was about.

As the students’ responses show, stress and anxiety can result from schoolwork in many ways. Kate had also shared, “Well some teachers stress me out and stuff like that…because they're like, ‘This has to be done in this day and this time and blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.’” Her blasé tone showed that she, like many of the other students, seemed to have gotten used to teachers assigning work that caused specific negative emotions. It may be anticipated that stress is an unavoidable side effect of expecting that students complete high quality work within a certain timeframe. However, it creates questions of how much more engaged students might be with their work if some of that stress and anxiety were alleviated.

**Negativity or Apathy toward School**

Many of these middle school students explained their academic feelings in broad descriptions of negativity or apathy towards school in general (n=38). The students expressed these negative emotions in many ways, such as unhappiness, reluctance, indifference, difficulty, hate, disinterest, or increased happiness when missing or leaving school. Many of these descriptors can be considered signs of apathy. Apathy and indifference may seem like neutral emotions, but in this case they must be viewed negatively since they hinder engagement and may in fact be signs of disengagement. Indeed, flow theory posits that apathy results when students are not engaged in an activity enough to raise their skills to meet a new challenge—i.e. low skill level combined with low challenge level—and thus become disinterested in it (Shernoff et al., 2003). This was the third highest occurring theme for negative emotions, and Focus Group 2 had far more occurrences than the other groups (n=14).
While the term “apathy” was not used in the focus group questions and most students did not use the term themselves, it can be inferred from many of their responses which show a general lack of emotion or interest towards school. For example, when asked how she felt while at school, Amira (Focus Group 3) offered, “I have mixed emotions about school.” Responding to the same question, Owen explained, “Indifferent. I kind of just roll through the motions of the day, not really doing much of anything, just kind of getting the stuff done.” Kyle (Focus Group 4) shared a shorter but similar statement about his lack of emotion regarding his schoolwork: “Sometimes I just want to get something done.” Jane (Focus Group 7) also shared, “Yeah, in the later periods, there's more fun activities I guess you could say, but pretty much it's just like a neutral emotion throughout the day.” In addition, Jane shared a few more strongly worded statements on this topic. She inferred, “There's times where I really don't feel happy. I feel just pure, negative emotion. That could just be some issue I have,” and expressed heightened negativity towards a specific class: “Math. Because I have like a bad history with that class. Last year was terrible, and the previous year before was just utterly horrible.” There is a lack of specificity to what Jane said and she seems to contradict herself, but her feelings of disconnect towards school are clear. It is difficult to imagine that Jane was engaged or interested in her academic experiences while this combination of both neutral and negative emotions was present.

Many of the students framed their negativity or apathy as a simple lack of happiness, or increased happiness when outside of school, as shown by a few students from Focus Group 2. Alyssa stated about how she feels at school, “I'm just alright, kind of fine if you suppose,” while Taylor said, “If I'm being honest, I don't feel like that many incredibly positive moods at school,” and that she feels stress from, “Almost everything.” Molly offered, “I mean, it's not really that often when I'm happy at school...Just not as much. There's so many drawbacks,” and later, “I'm
either stressed or anything else but happy.” This was a common explanation in other group meetings as well. When asked whether or not she felt happy during the school day, Allison (Focus Group 1) replied, “Not during most of the day.” When asked the same question, Anali (Focus Group 7) admitted, “I get happy when I walk out of school,” while Maya (Focus Group 6) stated simply, “There is no fun in school.” Trevor (Focus Group 1) also ironically noted what he enjoys most about school: “Leaving. Because it means I have 16 hours where I don't have to be here.” Similarly, Samantha (Focus Group 3) said, “I feel good when I miss school.” Within the context of hoping for a snow day, Amira (Focus Group 3) exclaimed, “And you know something is wrong with our school system when kids hope for natural disasters and sickness to come upon them, so they can miss school. There is something wrong with that.” Furthermore, many students expressed their negativity towards school as disinterest in the activities or topics that were offered to them. Jane from Focus Group 7 shared a response that encapsulated this theme:

I don't think there's really a time where I feel like there's a peak happiness, because school is just school to me. School, I have to go through it so I can get a good job and go to college like I said before.

Her response shows that eternal motivators did not translate to interest in her academic activities because “school is just school” and something she “[has] to go through.” Like Jane, other students indicated that the real world application of a particular subject or assignment needed to be clear in order for them to see the value in it, and that negativity resulted when such connections were not explicit. As Trevor (Focus Group 1) contended,

If school is supposed to teach you to be prepared for the real world that there's a lot of stuff that should be cut out of curriculum because there's so much stuff that's like, ‘When are we gonna use this?’
Taylor, Nate, and Logan (Focus Group 2) had an exchange in which they elaborated on the importance of everyday usefulness in schooling, and how they feel when that is not a clear focus of their schoolwork. Taylor began,

There isn't enough classes that teach us everyday life skills that we need to know… Like how to balance a checkbook, and how money works, and how the economy works more than how it works now, because I feel like they're telling us too much about history and not enough about now. We need to be learning more about stuff that is relevant.

Nate also commented on the need for schooling to have clear connections to everyday life:

You don't want to have to dread coming to school, because then you don't want to come in learning anything. That defeats the whole purpose of the school existing, because that's to get people to enjoy learning, to want to enforce it into their life.

Logan added,

Some teachers teach you stuff that you're barely going to use in life, and it's not worth the time. Teachers could be teaching you way more stuff that you'll be using in life than just a topic that you're never going to use in life.

Taylor then returned to the conversation to add a punctuating statement: “Especially when they know that it's useless and they still force it on us.”

In some cases students called out specific subject areas that in their opinion were the least relevant or interesting. Molly (Focus Group 2) recounted,

I agree with teaching things that you're not going to need in life, because I don't want to learn this because I'm never going to use it. Because my math teacher, there was this one chapter where she literally just said, ‘You're never going to use this unless you work at NASA or some important place, so just use your calculator and just write the whole entire equation in there.’ Not what I would like to do more often...when a concept is useless and you're never going to need it.

During the same meeting, Alyssa explained her views on the lack of relevance in her language arts class:

I've noticed a pattern in ELA. We're learning suspense. It's usually set in the past. It's usually not from our time. And I'd appreciate it more if there was more literature that was closer to now than over 100 years ago…They have us over-analyze. I tell you, we will
never, never, ever, ever, ever, ever use this in life. All the book reviews I've read ... I've never seen anyone over analyze themes, characters, plot, et cetera.

Similarly, Focus Group 1 fell into listing subjects that were their least favorite because of lack of relevance. Allison offered, “But I don't think Science is important to me because I just, I don't enjoy it and then I don't think it would benefit me in the long run.” Julia somewhat agreed, “And Science, there's topics where I feel like they're important but then there's also topics that I don't feel are that important.” Trevor offered his thoughts on two different subjects: “A lot of stuff we learn in Math seems unimportant…Some of the details we learn in History seem like this is a little bit unnecessary.”

Kate (Focus Group 6) gave a notable explanation that seemed to sum up what many of the students’ responses within this theme hinted at:

I feel like school really doesn't have a specific emotion for me. School is sort of just an emotion in itself. It's like… It's not really happy for me, but it's not really sad or angry. It's sort of just like nothing. It's just school. It's just something I do every day and that's required of me.

To Kate and the others, school symbolizes their negativity or apathy towards anything that is “required” of them. School then becomes “an emotion in itself,” and “just sort of like nothing,” simply another thing they have to do regardless of what they may be interested in which brings them enjoyment and happiness if left to make choices for themselves.

**Rules, Requirements, and Expectations**

A defining characteristic of adolescent development is that teenagers begin to assert their own individuality, often in opposition to what their parents and other adults expect of them. This can lead to tension with adult mentors and confusion amongst teens as to whether or not to follow sources of authority or their own inclinations. This characteristic led G. Stanley Hall to
describe “adolescence as a period of Sturm und Drang, [or] ‘storm and stress’” (Muuss, p. 34, 1968) since confrontations and emotionally heightened arguments can result when teenagers do not agree with what they are told to do. At school these sources of authority are encapsulated by the academic requirements and expectations passed down from teachers and the behavioral systems used to govern students. Expectedly, many of these middle school students shared negative reactions to the governing characteristics of CFMS or what teachers expected of them. This was the fourth highest occurring negative emotions theme (n=37), and responses were often prompted by the question, “Is there anything about school that you do not enjoy? Why or why not?”

Many of the students expressed general displeasure for overly strict rules. For example, Nina (Focus Group 4) said, “Because in certain classes we come in and sit down and you get right to work and it's not as fun,” while Jon (Focus Group 5) shared a similar observation: “Not all environments of school are the exact same. There's some teachers that don't allow you to do that because they don't trust you to be working.” Julia (Focus Group 1) shared, “There's also like classes where I make one little tiny subtle noise they yell at you. To where it's like, ‘Silence. I want dead silence while you're working on this.'” Anali (Focus Group 7) also shared a comment on the required volume level in a particular classroom: “Yeah, it really depends on with the teacher, because I have two ... Like I have one to two favorite teachers, and then the others, I just have to learn in those classes and not talk to [my friends].” Danielle (Focus Group 5) also found it unfair that some teachers had the same approach to the entire class, instead of student by student:

I feel like certain teachers are very strict on if we can move or not because if there's a couple people who can't really handle being in a group, they would punish the whole class and not let us talk or work with groups or anything like that.
Other students incredulously offered anecdotes about specific behaviors that certain teachers deemed unacceptable. Allison (Focus Group 1) shared,

   Okay, I'm gonna tell about this and I get yelled at, like a lot... I don't do this when I'm bored but a lot of teachers assume that I do it when I'm bored, I draw things when teachers are lecturing. Because I have a sketch notebook and I just set it down and start sketching and they'll assume that I'm not paying attention. And it was the first week of history and Mr. [A] called me out on it.

Like Allison, Evan had a habit of fidgeting a certain way in class that drew the ire of his teacher. He combined his story with the story of another student who was reprimanded unreasonably:

   I had putty that actually helped me focus and the teachers could even see it helped me focus. And then all the people just started taking putty and slime and stuff and just started messing with it. And then everyone gets in trouble for it and then I can't use it and then it doesn't help me out. Also...I remember going on the bus one time and this guy showed me he had a referral for sneezing too loudly in the middle of class...It's insane that how far teachers go.

Ella (Focus Group 3) also offered an example of a teacher from the previous year that she felt was overly picky about certain behaviors:

   All these rules, these strict rules... Last year my science teacher said that we had to raise our hand if we wanted to get up and get a tissue, that the only reason that we can get up without asking was if we were about to throw up or something. Otherwise we had to wait, and then raise our hand, and wait until she calls on us to be like, ‘Can I get a tissue?’ Some classrooms, they're like, ‘Okay you can get a tissue as long as you're not disrupting everything else that's happening.’

Focus Groups 2 had the highest number of responses within this theme (n=9), while Focus Groups 5 (n=8) and 1 (n=7) followed closely. In each group the conversation touched on how certain grade level teams had implemented behavior systems that the students felt were unjust. During the Focus Group 5 meeting, Celeste protested in response to what she did not enjoy about school,

   In [X] team we have this sheet where our teachers sign it if we do something bad or wrong. Not wrong but behavioral stuff. My ELA teacher signs them for those kids who are not paying attention or not getting any work done and just messing around.
Jon further explained and offered an example:

It's sometimes like when a teacher signs someone’s book…I know that I had my book signed once because I was the one working but one of my other friends were bugging me, so I got my book signed because they thought that I was trying to bug them...So I just feel like it's that sometimes with some teachers that don't trust other students because they're around people that they don't trust so they punish all of them that are there.

To Alyssa (Focus Group 2), this system amounted to a, “…whacked up justice system, because it claims to have good discipline, but it doesn't actually target the kids who actually need to discipline. Instead, they target the kids who are innocent. And [the teachers] overreact.” She later shared, “Yeah, I honestly feel like the teachers expect us to act like adults, and that immediately sours the learning process and it just makes me go, ‘Ugh!’” A few seventh grade students in Focus Group 6 used an example of their teachers’ strictness with students arriving late to class. Jackson began,

What I don’t enjoy about the school is how big it is and its rules. Say you're running one minute late. This school is so gigantic you can't run across it in enough time to be able to get to class in the three to six minutes that you have to get to it. I don't wanna be late to class so I'm sprinting down the halls and then teachers are yelling at me, ‘Don't run.’ There's nobody in the halls yet I still can't run.

Maya followed,

There's no win about being late to class because like some people have to like come from Gym and then go all the way back to Ms. [J's] Room or Ms. [A's] room and stuff like that. And I don't really like that. I think they should have more time to get there.

Finally, Kate completed the exchange:

And you're gonna get in trouble either way. Like if you're late to your class, you're gonna be tardy, but if you're running in the hallway you are still going to get in trouble and then you're also gonna be tardy anyways. So it's just a lose-lose situation.

Some students included comparisons between middle school and elementary school to clarify their stances on rules and expectations. This was another major topic from the Focus Group 2 meeting, and Nate, Taylor, and Molly had an exchange in which they agreed that the behavioral
expectations in middle school had shifted too drastically in an unfair direction. For instance, Nate shared that elementary school teachers were more like friends, while in middle school, “It's like that annoying person on your shoulder who's just like, ‘Make sure you don't do that,’ or, ‘Do that,’ or, ‘Oh, don't forget that.’ You don't want that. You want to feel welcome.” Taylor agreed and followed up,

I can understand part of it, because you're getting older and they expect you to be more mature with it, so they think they can treat you a different way…They don't need to baby us, but they don't need to treat us like how they would treat someone who's working at their job or something.

Molly then elaborated,

I agree when [Taylor] was talking about how teachers were treating us. They expect us to be adults or adult-like, and in elementary school, they were lenient and they let us mess around a little bit…I believe that most of the behavior problems that are caused in middle school is because the teachers are expecting too much from the kids as being like adults. I mean, we're going into high school, which is when I believe we should be treated more like adults. I mean, middle school is kind of like a different situation here, because high school is more adult-like and elementary school is kind of just like you're a silly kid and you're still allowed to make mistakes. Middle school is kind of that transition, so it's harder to find a place to know how to treat kids.

Focus Group 5 also touched on this comparison between middle and elementary school and shared views quite similar to those of the Group 2 members. Danielle expounded,

I also feel like a lot of the teachers are drastically different. Because in fifth grade, those fifth grade teachers were strict…acting like we were in middle school now. But it's way more different being in eighth grade going to high school because it's way worse going into high school with the teachers changing to act like we're in high school now.

Celeste also offered, “Even though they said that in middle school you'd have a lot more freedom, it's like we don't because we are being a lot more restricted because of our phones and food and all that stuff.” Lastly, Drew shared,

I'd say in elementary school you would have that one homeroom teacher that would always be looking after you but in middle school there's always teachers around the wing looking after you and making sure nothing is going wrong. You're always being watched
down and sometimes in elementary school the teacher couldn't be looking because there's only one teacher looking after you, but in middle school there's multiple.

In both of these exchanges, the students indicated a disparity between what was expected of them and how their teachers enforced behavioral rules in elementary school and middle school.

To some students, the biggest shift between elementary and middle school involved the increased amount of work they were required to do within what they felt was an unreasonable amount of time. They did not speak about this in terms of stress, as was previously shown in this chapter, but in terms of negative feelings about the work requirements themselves. Owen and Clay spoke about this during the Group 3 meeting. Owen began,

The speed we are expected to learn at and the amount of work outside of class is very, very different in middle school than it is in elementary school. Like Eve was saying, it’s like, ‘Oh could you just do these eight math problems that will probably take five minutes of your time?’ Then you'd go out and you'd play with your friends. But now it’s like, ‘Can you take these two hours out of your time to do this homework?’

Then Clay observed,

Well something that I've noticed was in elementary school classes usually were about 25 minutes to 30 and now it’s like 45 minutes so it’s been doubled about. And then... The amount of homework that you get, it’s also doubled. Everything's been doubling.

Clay also contended, “Like in elementary school, you barely went to any class .... Like every single class, but now you have to move from class to class within the 45 minutes that you have.”

Other students also stated their displeasure with class requirements and time provided, but without the comparison to elementary school. From Group 2, Logan shared what he felt were unfair demands on his time after school:

I say homework time length. Let's say a teacher gives me homework at the end of the day, and I have to do homework and I have no study hall to do it in and I have to do it at home, which I do not like to do, because if I'm doing it at home for a while, like a while if it's long, then that's kind of like wasting time from my family, to see my family, then doing schoolwork. I'm against that and just do not enjoy that.
During the same meeting, Nate shared his views on time provided as represented by due dates:

I do dislike the so called due date, because they usually make it seem like, ‘Oh yeah, do whatever you want,’ you know? And then you seem to have the whole world to you. But then it suddenly just crushes and it ruins the entire idea when they say, ‘Oh, by the way, it's due next week.’ And you're like, ‘I don't have enough time for that.’ If you want good work, you're going to have to have enough time to do it. You just can't cram things in like that.

Alyssa also shared two viewpoints related to time requirements and her Genius Hour project:

And then there's a time limit that's an issue as well, because if you expect good work of a project, yet you expect it in a few days, well, you're not really going to get good work. And I think it should be extended to more than just three days to do it.

She later stated exasperatingly, “Good work can't be rushed, and if you expect me to rush yet have good work, well…” To seventh grader Morgan from Focus Group 6, this issue with time requirements arose regarding a class in which she felt the material moved along too quickly:

I like doing [the work] slower to understand it. Like math kinda moves really fast. She teaches a lesson, but I feel like she does it fast…It's hard to understand what she's saying… So I think she should take more time with the lessons. Like if it takes all day to learn the lesson, that's fine. There's no rush or anything.

In a final subtopic with this theme, students lamented unreasonable schoolwork requirements that were not related to time, but rather to a lack of choice or autonomy. For example, Jackson (Focus Group 6) suggested teachers should, “Take action with them and [make] it more fun and enjoyable for the students instead of just having to like from the book everything being exactly how it's written. That kind of takes the fun out of it.” When asked what she did not enjoy about school, Taylor (Focus Group 2) stated,

There're too many requirements, like a very, very specific due date, and if it's not stretched out enough, if you have to do a specific amount of things, I feel like it just ruins the whole freedom idea. The whole aspect that you have choices.

Responding to the same question, Alyssa said,
Genius Hour, now the paper has to be two to three pages. And you know, I'm actually considering not doing the paper, because it says so in the description that you could do whatever you want. So, if you say you can do anything, then why do you give out a certain set of requirements that your project needs?

Alyssa offered another example of a particular social studies assignment that she felt represented unfair requirements:

When I did this one assignment for social studies, I thought that you just only had to fill in the blanks. But it turns out, you actually have to write what it was about. I thought that the text explained it enough. And I got penalized because of it…. [My teacher] didn't even bother to see my perspective. He just says, ‘Oh, well, you didn't even complete it.’ And I wasn't purposefully being lazy. I thought that was the directions. I did nothing malicious… What do you think that says? That sends quite a bit of a bad message.

Owen (Focus Group 3) also shared an example of a particular assignment. While he was in sixth grade, a departing teacher required the class to do something questionable:

Because she was leaving though, in fourth quarter she made us all write letters of recommendation but we still had her for a month of school… She's like, ‘Alright, what's good about me, write what's bad about me.’ And I was thinking in my head, what do I write in this letter? And I was telling my mom about it and she was like, ‘Wow, that's just awful.'

More specifically, students in the Focus Group 1 and 5 discussions identified math as a subject area in which the level of requirements overwhelmed their desire to do the work. From Focus Group 1, Julia identified a specific pedagogical approach in her math class that she felt was overly restrictive:

I hate when I have to memorize things. Especially in Math when we're gonna have to, like when we have to memorize these equations. I'm not gonna remember them and I'm gonna get a bad grade... That kind of throws me off.

Evan and Allison had another exchange about math class during the meeting. Evan began with,

Like, do it this way and you have to do is this way and show your work on it otherwise you're gonna get it wrong. But I have my own way that helps me get it faster and more efficiently but my Math teacher won't let me use it because it's not her way and it just makes me kind of frustrated because I have to learn that exact way otherwise I'm gonna get a lot of points taken off or grades and stuff like that.
Then Allison followed:

I kind of agree with what you said. I don't like it when teachers make you have to confine to one way of solving a problem. Like especially recently in math, I've come across this multiple times where there's this much easier way of doing it where you don't need this algorithm or whatever and it takes you 10 seconds to do but instead you have to do it one way.

From Focus Group 5, Jon and Celeste also spoke about math class but in a slightly different way. Rather than criticize the lack of choice within completing the work, they would rather not have to take math class at all. Celeste said,

I would say I like to do some things at school. If it's ELA homework I'll do it happily but if it's like math homework I just think of it as something that I have to do. I'm forced to do it.

Responding to Celeste, Jon added,

I'm like that too. If its ELA or history I'm all happy, but if it's more math and science I'm usually on the downside because it's something that is more forced to do. I don't really get anything from it.

Of all the students who responded within this theme, Alyssa had the most to share about negative emotions and rules, requirements, and expectations. She was the only participant who mentioned homework within this theme:

I kind of have mixed feelings about homework. It can be helpful when it's used correctly. However, it's not really ... I noticed that the homework, not only does it eat away time from your freedom, but it's also not actually going to help you in life. You're actually doing meaningless paperwork, because the school says so. There's a difference between school and learning, and homework isn't learning.

In each of the examples in this section, students lamented that the behavioral and academic expectations and requirements placed on them were unfair and decreased their enjoyment for school and schoolwork. Alyssa’s intriguing assertion, “There’s a difference between school and learning,” seems to make this clear. To her, although the purpose of school is learning, the coercive aspect of school separates it from its true purpose. To some adolescents, “Because the
school says so” is not enough to make an academic experience worthwhile to them, and in fact invokes a negative reaction.

**Negativity or Stress from Social Interaction**

Several of the negative emotion themes were the opposite companion to a positive emotional context. For example, just as schoolwork can be a facilitator of creativity, interest, and/or student autonomy, and thusly enjoyment for students, it can also be a source of stress or anxiety. This shows that depending on the individual student and circumstances a particular academic context can foster either positive or negative emotions, or sometimes a combination of both. Accordingly, positive emotions from social interaction was the highest occurring theme in the entire study (n=44), but as this section will show social interaction can also have a negative emotional effect depending on the student and how the interaction unfolds. Some students spoke of negative emotions and social interaction in terms of stress or anxiety, while others shared opinions of general unhappiness or displeasure. This was the fourth highest occurring negative emotions theme (n=26), and occurred the most during the Focus Group 2 discussion (n=8) with Focus Group 7 following close behind (n=7).

Many of the students shared that the social environment of school is a source of stress and anxiety for them. Amira (Focus Group 3) had admitted that, “There's a lot of pressure put on us socially,” because, “Well, our self-awareness amplified, our pressure amplified. Everything just got more. And usually it’s not a good more. It causes more stress on us.” During the same conversation, Owen observed

Besides from school in itself, the social interactions between students can also be extremely stressful. There are always those people who have the roles that you're supposed to play. These are the ‘Cool Kids’…You know [the roles are] bad but you play
into it anyway and it’s kind of hard to break out of. It can be very stressful just to try to keep up with being social and everything.

Ella agreed, “Like [Owen] was saying, sometimes there's also peer pressure that will make you want to do stuff and it's causing stress on you cause you're like, ‘I shouldn't do that,’ but then they're doing it.” A few of the seventh grade students shared similar thoughts. From Focus Group 7, Anali offered, “The only time I'm stressed is if there's drama going on and someone brings me into it,” while Jane stated,

I feel anxious all the time outside of school…and inside of school. In a group of friends I have right now, just there's a lot of inner drama that doesn't really float out into other groups, but it just stays with us.

Maya gave a statement quite similar to Jane’s regarding her usual emotional state and friendship drama during the Focus Group 6 meeting:

I feel like the social environment at school is a little more stressful, like because we're all in middle school to the awkward age where everybody has to fit in and be cool or they're immediately outcasted from social groups. I found many groups of friends that I can hang out with and confide in, but there's always gonna be that one group of people who doesn't particularly get along well with you and causes conflict behind everyone's back.

Stress or negativity from social interaction was particularly concerning to a few of the Focus Group 2 members. To Taylor, this social pressure coalesced whenever she was required to present in front of her classmates. She acknowledged, “I'm nervous especially when it comes to presenting and being up in front of people, which thankfully doesn't happen too often,” and,

I'm totally fine with presenting in front of a teacher, or if I'm writing something down and having [teachers] read it. But reading something out in front of the whole class is really, really difficult for me to cope with.

She later elaborated further,

Sometimes I'm glad things are interactive, because I do think people should interact with each other. I think they should make friends. I don't want anyone to be alone unless they want to be alone for some reason. But I feel like sometimes I wish things would be less interactive, so I don't have to, you know, stand up in front of class and present something,
so I don't have to record something and play it to everyone. It just worries me, and I don't know which side to lean towards, having things be individual or having things be group work.

Although Taylor was the only student to specifically mention public speaking, other students agreed with her displeasure for group work. Especially concerning to the middle school students were situations in which they were required to work with others with whom they did not get along, or whom they felt did not contribute an equal amount of work. A few students from Group I shared their views on this situation. Evan began with, “Sometimes your partner doesn't even do any of the work…It's like a huge assignment that's supposed to be meant for two people but you're doing it by yourself because you got picked with a bad partner.” Prompted by Evan, Trevor offered,

I had a person who I worked with at the beginning of the year in History a lot and he was used to doing a lot less work than was required. So I usually ended up doing a lot of the work and he didn't do that much and we ended up getting a couple of bad grades because I was doing these two person projects by myself for... Because I wasn't gonna let him take it home because I didn't want to get a bad grade because he doesn't know what he's doing.

Allison then made it clear that she would rather be allowed to choose who to work with because of the exasperation that resulted from having to work with someone she was unfamiliar with:

“When your teacher partners you up with someone, I feel like that is so much worse than just sitting there and doing it by yourself.” Group 2 had a similar exchange to Group 1 regarding the issues that arise during group work. Alyssa began the conversation and included an admission about shyness:

This is mainly me, but I'm not exactly that great in working with groups. I don't tend to show it, but I tend to get a bit nervous when I'm working in groups, because I just feel kind of shy...And also, there's the added risk that the person I may be working with may be lazy, and I'll just end up doing all the work by myself. Or their laziness will hurt the project, and I'll get penalized for even being with the lazy person.
Then Taylor added,

I do think there should be at least one person who's been identified as more mature in a group that would keep people on task and make sure that people do their part. The rule I like to go by is if you're in a group and someone decides not to help with it, you don't put their name on whatever you're doing, because they don't deserve to be able to get the good grade that other people got.

Nate concurred with Taylor:

Yeah, I agree with that. I've had presentations where I've written just a whole bunch of stuff, done like every slide or so, and then they only do one or two or something. And then it comes to presenting, and I feel like then I have to take over just to present all of it. Otherwise, I'll get a bad grade. I feel like that's not right, because then the person who didn't do enough work will get a good grade that they didn't deserve. There needs to be extra planning where the teacher creates a bond to know enough of their students to know who works well with who, who doesn't work as well with who, just to get the most efficiency out of it.

Finally, Molly completed the exchange by concurring with the others and sharing how these situations have affected her:

I agree with [Taylor] and stuff about working in groups, with working with people you know, because I work with people I don't know and they just destroy me, because I would work with them and they would do nothing, absolutely nothing. And so I was doing the part I was supposed to do, but they weren't doing their part. And then when we had to present it, I presented my part and they didn't, and I was pinned for it.

This same topic was touched upon by a few of the seventh grade students from Group 7 as well.

Jane shared,

I like projects where I work alone, because…I don't really have a lot of friends in my classes, and I don't make friends really easily, and so I think it's better if I just work alone and have my own ideas. I don't like having to fight with someone over like, do I want their idea, or do I want my idea?

She later said,

It's really easy for someone to get left out in a group project, because either they're like the one with a lot of ideas, or they're like the one not trying to lead the group, that has zero idea what to do.
During the same meeting, Ava agreed, “I also don't like group projects because some people get left out,” while Makayla followed up, “Also like [Jane] said, so you don't have to fight with anyone.”

While lamentations about group work dominated this theme, a few students shared their feelings on other situations regarding social interaction. Jon and Maya indicated their displeasure at being in academic settings that did not include their closer friends. Jon (Focus Group 5) said, “All my other friends are on [another] team so sometimes I feel left out because all of them would be at some place,” while Maya (Focus Group 6) stated simply, “I don't get to see my friends that much.”

During the Group 2 meeting, Taylor connected the tension that can arise during group work with a more general observation about social interaction in middle school:

One of the things that I don't enjoy about it is taking time to find people who are accepting of who you are. I feel like there isn't enough people who either understand if you're going through something or understand if you need help. I feel like people just take it the wrong way, and I wish people would be more understanding and accepting at school. And I feel like the way certain kids interact, it just pushes people together, but sometimes it pushes people together who really shouldn't be together, and they can end up hurting other people and themselves in the process.

Taylor may have been the only student willing to admit such private concerns in an open forum such as a focus group meeting. However, the responses about group work could be indicative of the same issue with accepting and feeling accepted by others but on a more micro level. This shows how finely tuned an academic social setting must be for it to encourage engagement rather than hinder it, and how the more uncontrollable aspects of middle school social issues can seep into academics to affect students in a negative way.
Interaction at school happens between students and between students and teachers, and for each type of interaction these middle school students shared positive and negative emotional experiences. While these students shared more positive emotional experiences (n=32) with teacher interaction than negative, their negative emotional experiences with teachers still occurred at a considerable number (n=23). This theme is separate from the middle school students’ negative emotional experiences with rules, requirements, and expectations. Within this theme, the students focused more on their relationships with teachers and the influence teachers had on the mood of their learning environments, albeit unfavorably. Focus Group 2 had the highest number for this theme (n=8), as they did with several of the negative emotion categories.

As shown in the students’ evidence of teachers and positive emotions, students look to their teachers to establish positive moods for them. As the students also explained however, teachers can have the same effect regarding negative moods and this adversely affected their engagement and desire to learn. As Nate (Focus Group 2) stated directly, “There're other times where I feel like I'm not as welcome, like [Alyssa] said, with the teachers. If you just don't have a welcoming learning environment, you're not going want to learn. That's pointless then.” Molly made a similar statement during the same focus group discussion:

When I go to school, I try to hide my emotions if I'm having a bad day, because that will affect other people because they'll see me and some people worry about me, and it will affect them and how they learn. But some teachers don't [hide their emotions], and so it kind of affects other people.

Jane (Focus Group 7) gave a similar general statement about how teachers’ emotions affected her:
There are teachers that give us really happy vibes, and those are the teachers you want to be around. And then there are teachers that they give out these vibes that they don't really like their job. They'd rather pursue something else. They just give off really negative vibes, and that really just effects how you feel throughout the entire class.

Morgan (Focus Group 6) also observed how a teacher’s emotions seemed to affect the feel of the room:

A lot of kids in my math class like to just go around and stuff, so I think that's why my teacher kind of gets really mad at them. I feel like it kind of makes her like down, like angry, not as happy. There's kids that just mess around all the time.

Some students echoed these contentions with more specific descriptions of certain negative emotions attributed to particular teachers. Alyssa gave a pointed description of a teacher from elementary school to whom she assigned a derogatory nickname involving a bodily function, and compared her to other teachers with the same emotional traits:

And when I was with her, I didn't feel happy at all. I actually dreaded going to school, and then it would be the same for last year, because all the teachers, they were just so rude and sassy and intolerable. And I think that somewhere in their mind, they thought that being like that was going to be cool to kids. Well, guess what? It's not cool being rude and sassy.

She later overgeneralized for emphasis, “Teachers don't really care about being good and just care about getting their paycheck, and do that by being rude and sassy and just being average.”

Three students from Focus Group 5 had an exchange in which they shared common observations similar to Alyssa’s. Danielle began,

Teachers who are usually grumpy or mad have chosen the job to be a teacher around kids. [They] expect us to be all happy but if they don't want to work around us they should've chose something else where they can do something different.

Celeste then added,

I feel the way [teachers] act, how they present themselves every day. Some teachers act all grumpy and mad and that passes on to the students and sometimes they're happy and energetic and that goes on to the students as well to make them feel awake.
Jon completed the exchange and included some rhetorical questions:

I feel the same way because some teachers are just plain rude to students here and I bet most of us are thinking in our head, ‘Why'd you choose being a teacher if you don't like students?’ I think that every day to some teachers and it’s like, why would you choose a job that you don't students or kids? It's just confusing. Why would choose a job that they don't like students? It's just annoying and weird.

In another group of responses within this theme, the students were perhaps not as harsh as Alyssa, Danielle, Celeste, and Jon, but commented on teachers who did not utilize a positive enough tone when presenting lessons or assignments. For example, Evan (Focus Group 1) explained how this situation affected his engagement during class:

For me it's kind of hard to focus because I think some teachers used to need to put a little more emotion and pizzazz into what they do…so people would be interested. Because I know some people pull out their phones and stuff during middle of class and they don't even get into it…because they can't focus.

Correspondingly, Amira offered with an impression,

I feel like for me, it mainly depends on the teacher. Because if you have a teacher and they're teaching something and they teach it like this and they don't ever show any enthusiasm and they act like they hate school as much as you do. Then it's not fun, it’s just like, ‘Ugh.’

She returned to her explanation later and asked some rhetorical questions of her own:

They're talking monotone, every day, all the time, then it’s like, ‘Do you have any want to do this? Why did you want to do this if you're gonna talk monotone all the time?’ It sounds like you wanna go home and do something else with your life…when you're just bored and not having any enthusiasm.

Maggie (Focus Group 4) also noted how her perception of teachers’ indifference can affect her learning:

Sometimes I just feel like it's just papers being handed out to you and they're just telling you to read it and fill out these answers. I feel like nothing major is sticking, and we keep covering the same spot.
Interaction with teachers was a key talking point for Focus Group 2, who had both the highest number of responses about teacher interaction and positive emotions (n=9) and negative emotions (n=8). In both emotional contexts, they used the term “close bond” for the importance of establishing positive, trustworthy relationships with teachers within a comparison between elementary and middle school. Within this conversation, Taylor and Alyssa indicated the consequences that resulted when this bond was lacking. Taylor explained,

I know that we should be on topic, and I know that we should be there and be willing to learn, but I think we should also be able to bond with the teachers, because if we don't bond with the teachers, then you don't want to go to school ... You don't want to go to a place in general where everyone there is someone that you don't feel close to. You want to be comfortable where you are, and I feel like kids here who are this age, a lot of them don't feel comfortable enough with their teachers.

Then Alyssa offered her own account:

I don't really go to this middle school for events at all, because I don't feel any close bonding, and I deviate more to the elementary...And about the distance, the lack of bonding, I don't really depend on any of my teachers for help, because I don't have a close relationship with them, so why would I ask you for help? And one is quite rude, so why would I want to ask someone who I only know is going to be rude? Like in class, I've seen some of my classmates ask for Mrs. [J]'s help, and she just dismissed them by asking them to look in their notes. But sometimes you do need the help from an adult.

Taylor then summarized their points:

What causes [middle school students] to rebel against the norms and against what the teachers say is because there is no close bond. And I feel like if you had a close bond with your teacher, you wouldn't want to be so negative towards them as much, right?

A final group of students who responded within this theme recalled specific anecdotes involving teachers reacting in overly negative or unfair ways towards students. They seemed to remember these stories because of how adversely they were affected by them. For example, Amira and Owen (Focus Group 3) had an exchange about a teacher who they felt had not kept his word.

Amira seemed reluctant to be specific, offering, “Where they'd say one thing and then they'd do
the opposite thing, and they're being hypocritical all the time. So I'm not going to name names.”

She later returned to her story:

I was waiting for someone to say some. Where they say, ‘Oh you don't need to study this, you've been working hard, I'm going to give you a break,’ and then they're like, ‘Oh but here's a packet, Oh but here's this.’

Owen encouraged her with, “I know who that is.” Emboldened, Amira completed her tale: “Your students won't trust you or believe anything you say if you keep lying to them. That's not how it works.” Owen then recounted a story of his own about a teacher from sixth grade who had snapped at a student in class:

She snapped at a kid... He is a brilliant kid, but he was telling Mrs. [K], ‘I think you're teaching the lunar cycle wrong,’ because she was saying the eclipse was when the moon was in the way of the sun. So basically that when there is a full moon, the moon was in between the earth and the sun. But the kid was saying, ‘But if the sun was like this, then the side that we would see would be black so it wouldn't.’ And she got so mad and she yelled at him; she made him cry.

Owen’s story shows how fragile teachers’ emotional states can be, and how that can leave a lasting negative impression. Jon also related a story during the Focus Group 5 meeting about a teacher with seemingly ridiculous expectations for students and an excessively critical tone:

Some teachers I feel like don't even care because there's one teacher I know... I was in ELA and I sneezed and she was like, ‘Be quiet!’ And everyone else in the entire room was talking so I sneezed, she told me to be quiet and rolled her eyes. And two days ago, because some people are special ed they have to go in a different room...for a test and she was like, ‘I don't really want them in my room because I just cleaned the floors and I don't want their grimy hands all over the new desks and the floors and all the stuff I just cleaned.’ And I feel like she has a problem with certain students because they do something on accident.

Throughout this study, these middle school students showed how critical it is for teachers to foster positive emotions for students, and the degree to which that depends on teachers’ choices. Furthermore, this dependence is precarious because incorrect choices regarding pedagogy, classroom environment, or student interaction can lead to negative emotions and
disengagement from academic activities. The implications of this will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Negative Emotions and Academic Contexts: Conclusion

As the evidence from the students’ responses shows, just as positive emotions occurred in a variety of contexts for this group of participants, the same was shown for negative emotions. Certain academic contexts, such as social interaction, interaction with teachers, and real world interest and value, were shown to have either positive or negative emotional effects depending on the participant and extenuating circumstances. Like the positive emotion themes, some students spoke at length about specific themes, but did not share their views on others. Some contexts for negative emotions occurred at higher totals than others over the course of the seven focus group meetings, both by overall totals and by focus group. Additional research with more participants is necessary to determine if particular contexts correlate with certain demographic groups or student characteristics.

Focus Group Findings: Conclusion

As the extensive evidence from the focus group discussions shows, these middle school students were able to voice their own perspectives on the academic contexts from CFMS which inspired positive or negative emotions. These perspectives were shared in response to focus group questions which allowed the students to volunteer their own opinions in a socially supportive setting to address the overall research question for this study. The findings were presented as themes ascertained by carefully comparing and contrasting the students’ responses to show the frequency of which emotional engagement patterns occurred more than others.
Chapter 7 will detail the implications of the findings for adolescent engagement in academic settings.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study was designed to answer one overall research question:

How do mid-adolescent students describe the academic contexts for their emotional engagement experiences?

To answer this question, I synthesized the three main theories from the theoretical framework for mid-adolescents’ emotional engagement in academics—flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993), and control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006). The major components of these theories—positive emotions, optimal learning environments, and psychological well-being with further influence from Shernoff (2013), Shernoff, Tonks, and Anderson (2014), Lewis et al. (2011), Fredrickson (2001), and Newmann (1992)—form a cyclical relationship. Figure 1, found in Chapter 1 (p.7) depicts how this balanced cycle leads to emotional engagement for mid-adolescent students. The parameters of this theoretical framework and the research question guided the qualitative research design and the crafting of the subsequent questions the middle students were asked during the open-ended survey, focus group discussions, and follow-up survey. The students’ insightful and nuanced responses, especially during the focus group discussions, showed combinations of positive and negative emotions experienced in a range of particular academic contexts. These findings revealed the precarious nature of emotional engagement for middle school students and
how sensitive it is to environmental and situational factors. This study reflected, synthesized, and added to the existing literature on emotional engagement for this age group.

Major Findings and Implications

The major findings of this study will be discussed in the following subsections in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature for emotional engagement for mid-adolescent students: Inspiring Flow for Mid-Adolescent Students, Importance of Positive Social Interaction, Importance of Positive Teacher Interaction, Importance of Student Autonomy, Importance of Authentic Instruction, Importance of Active Learning and Creativity, and Preventing Emotional Disengagement. While the total number of positive emotion themes (n=237) outweighed the total number of negative emotion themes (n=206), this study is notable for featuring nuanced descriptions from mid-adolescents regarding both emotional engagement and disengagement experiences.

Inspiring Flow for Mid-Adolescent Students

While stage environment fit theory argues for the necessity of positive affect in middle school learning environments (Eccles et al., 1993), and control value theory distinguishes the importance of positive emotions as antecedents for achievement (Pekrun, 2006), flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) holds the largest influence over the framework for this study because of the emotional parameters it provides for optimal engagement. Shernoff and colleagues utilized flow theory to guide the characterization of optimal learning environments (2013), and has applied it to many studies of various learning environments and academic processes (Shernoff et al., 2003; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Shernoff et al., 2014). While ESFs were often
utilized as data collection instruments in these studies to quantify individuals’ engagement levels in various contexts, flow itself represents a qualitative state in which positive emotional reactions such as enjoyment and interest have an indispensable function to experiencing optimal engagement (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Fredricks et al. (2004) have also suggested that flow can be a qualitative lens to investigate “high emotional involvement or investment” (p. 63) in academic activities. For this study, flow theory guided the creation of the open-ended survey instrument (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997) and focus group questions. Additionally, flow theory not only conceptualizes the simultaneous experience of interest, enjoyment, and challenge (Shernoff, 2013), but also occurrences of negative emotional experiences that lead to disengagement—i.e. boredom, apathy, and stress and anxiety (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Shernoff et al., 2014). Given its qualitative nature though, it was also necessary to avoid simply explaining the concept of flow to the students directly because that may have overly influenced their answers.

According to the results of the survey and focus group questions, there were students whose responses revealed different combinations of the classic flow descriptors—intense focus combined with enjoyment, becoming absorbed in a task, blocking out distractions such as hunger, or not noticing or caring about time passing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). These experiences occurred during contexts in which the students were allowed to work on long-term, open-ended assignments such as projects that involved writing or creativity and a high degree of student autonomy. A few students confirmed these experiences when responding to the survey questions which specifically inquired about flow feelings, and one student even used the term “flow” during a focus group discussion when he expressed annoyance at being interrupted by the bell while he was working on a writing project. These descriptions were rare amongst the student
responses, but that neither confirms that these students experienced flow nor that the students who did not describe such experiences did not experience flow.

However, the students’ responses indicated possible connections between heightened states of engagement and involvement in advanced math and ELA classes and extra-curricular activities, self-identification with athletics or creative endeavors, and self-confidence. These characteristics were evident in the two focus groups—Group 1 and Group 6—which were formed around eighth and seventh grade students who gave the strongest indications of optimal engagement in their survey responses. These two groups, along with the eighth grade “Criticism” Group 2, had the highest number of occurrences in several positive and negative emotion themes as indicated in Tables 3 and 4. Further research with additional participants and data collection instruments such as questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and achievement data would be necessary to draw more confident conclusions on these connections. The findings from Groups 1 and 6 suggest however that connections exist between students who are already highly engaged at school, clear opinions on what engages them, involvement in extra-curricular activities and advanced classes, and their willingness to offer their experiences with both positive and negative emotions in academic contexts.

As intriguing as students’ responses were regarding possible individual flow experiences, the goal of this study was to indicate common themes for middle school students’ emotional engagement in academics. The goal for educators cannot be to guarantee that every student in classroom experiences flow through their schoolwork because that is unrealistic and likely impossible due to its highly individualized and contextualized nature. What flow theory truly provides for teachers is a framework for crafting an emotionally engaging pedagogy and facilitating optimal learning environments (Shernoff, 2013). In such environments teachers
provide clear goals with “immediate and forthcoming” feedback (Shernoff et al., p. 213, 2014), “support for autonomy and intrinsic interests and feeling understood by teachers and peers” (Shernoff, Tonks, & Anderson, p. 170, 2014), and heightened “involvement, engagement, self-efficacy, and sense of participation “ (p. 170). Furthermore, academic activities must be designed to balance skill and challenge at a developmentally appropriate level. This skill-challenge balance “is significantly and consistently correlated with optimal experience” (Shernoff et al., p. 213, 2014) and is shown to mediate subsequent positive emotional responses. A complex learning environment that appeals to students’ emotions in multiple ways is necessary for as many students as possible to experience some simultaneous combination of flow indicators (Shernoff, Tonks, & Anderson, 2014).

The students’ responses indicated the preeminence of emotional engagement as a prerequisite for cognitive and behavioral engagement, as the students explained they were more likely to pay attention and exert full effort if their schoolwork and classroom settings were enjoyable and interesting. Furthermore, the students indicated situations in which these positive emotion combinations were not present, and gave specific contexts for boredom, apathy, stress and anxiety, and other negative emotions. In such situations, the students were less likely to be motivated by their schoolwork and expressed variations of displeasure and exasperation at having to endure such experiences. Such experiences may reflect an improper skill-challenge balance, which causes individuals to be less likely to exert sustained effort towards increasingly difficult challenges, thus negatively affecting their learning (Shernoff et al., 2014).

While specific descriptions of the classic flow state may have been rare for the students in this study, they did strongly indicate situations in which particular classroom settings or academic activities included simultaneous combinations of the indicators identified in the
optimal engagement literature. In other words, while most students did not describe total psychic absorption or ignoring hunger, many did describe instances in which high levels of interest, enjoyment, and challenge occurred together in academic contexts. These responses formed the backbone of the specific positive emotion themes which will be further discussed throughout this chapter: positive interaction with peers and teachers, student autonomy, authentic instruction, and allowing students to be active and creative. In some sections the negative side of each context is also presented as a revealing comparison. Furthermore, the final section shows the negative emotional impact of mismatched educational practices for this age group.

Shernoff (2013) asserts simply, “If schools are not created as places where individuals can regularly experience flow, it also follows that they are not set up to regularly experience learning” (p. 12). This is a bold statement, and probably intended to challenge educators to reexamine their instructional practices for clear appeals to students’ interest and enjoyment levels, and to appropriately challenge them with meaningful, authentic work. Middle school teachers should welcome this challenge and integrate as many simultaneous, positive emotional contexts as possible into complex, nuanced academic experiences. Frankly, optimal emotional engagement for this age group is too important to ignore, and the consequences of emotional disengagement are too damaging to be acceptable.

**Importance of Positive Social Interaction**

As indicated by the focus group findings, the highest occurring context for positive emotions in academic settings was positive social interaction, especially when students were allowed to work or be with their friends. This theme was evenly dispersed as well, suggesting a general level of importance to most adolescent students. The students expressed that they felt
happy when they saw their friends during lunch or exploratory classes, that their core classes were more enjoyable when their friends were there, and that they preferred being allowed to choose their friends to work with during cooperative learning activities. In some responses students indicated that friends served as positive counters to negative personal, academic or family issues. This is supported by Furrer and Skinner (2003), who indicate that relatedness with “key social partners” in academic settings leads to greater positive emotional engagement and lessens negative emotions. However, the literature (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Marks, 2000; Patrick & Ryan, 2001; Ryan, Patrick, and Kaplan, 2007; Shernoff & Czikszentmihalyi, 2009) that focuses on relatedness and social support in classrooms does not focus specifically on pre-existing friendships or favored peers as a powerful source of positive affect. Simply, academic activities and settings were more enjoyable for these students when their friends were there. Conversely, some students also spoke quite extensively about negative emotions and social interaction as well. They did not enjoy when they could not see their friends, or when they were forced to work with other students who were not their friends. Many students also spoke of stress or anxiety due to the social pressures of middle school or when difficulties with friendships arise and how these can contribute to negative feelings through a school day. This comparative side of the peer interaction data shows that one overall context can evoke either positive or negative emotions depending on other nuanced or individualized factors.

Engagement is often conceptualized as an individualized process, and yet the students’ responses show that their positive emotional engagement often depended on the presence of favored peers with whom to share their academic environments and activities. This is supported by much of the foundational literature on engagement. Marks’ (2000) maintains that learning environments must feature a combination of positive emotions and social support, while
Fredricks, et al. (2004) include “positive reactions to classmates” as a component of emotional engagement. Shernoff and Czikszentmihalyi’s (2009) model of flow in academic settings includes social relatedness as a key component, while Walker (2010) studied the positive relationship between socially interactive settings and flow experiences. It has also been posited that flow may even spread from student to student under the right conditions (Culberton, Fullgar, Simmons, & Zhu, 2015). Johnson (2008) and Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) have also shown that nontraditional settings that emphasize peer interaction and collaboration lead to increased positive affect and engagement.

The clearest link however between the findings on positive social interaction and emotional engagement and the existing literature is through stage-environment fit theory. Eccles et al. (1993) assert that learning environments must be carefully crafted to positively counteract the negative personal and social effects of adolescent development which often compound as students move from elementary to middle school. Indeed, these students’ responses on negative emotions and social interaction reflected key aspects of the theory which indicate that positive peer interaction often decreases when students transition to the new building. This means that teachers must take care to promote relatedness in a classroom to counteract the social tensions of adolescence (Ryan, Patrick, & Kaplan, 2007; Patrick & Ryan, 2001) Furthermore, Eccles et al. (1993) note that schools must take care to minimize “social comparison” and the “[disruption of] social relationships” (p. 94) in order to emotionally engage students.

These findings and their connections to emotional engagement literature have several implications. Students are less likely to feel as if they are subject to social comparison or that their social relationships have been disrupted if they were purposefully placed into grade level teams and exploratory classes that include their pre-existing friendships. The counselors and
registrar at CFMS create groups of students and classes they feel will integrate well together, but perhaps more specific data is needed from students on whom they would rather be placed with. Furthermore, teachers should vary their cooperative learning practices so that students are given opportunities to choose their partners in certain situations. While surely ability grouping and differentiation have important applications within instructional design, they should be balanced with allowing students to work with their friends when appropriate. After all, friends enjoy each other’s company and likely share similar interests. If teachers devise challenging assignments for friends to confront together, emotional engagement is likely.

Importance of Positive Teacher Interaction

Stage-environment fit studies often refer to positive relationships in a classroom as “relatedness,” which encompasses positive relationships with teachers as well. Indeed, positive relatedness between students and their peers often depends on whether or not teachers can relate to their students since teachers are models of positive interaction for the entire room. The students in this study looked forward to spending time with teachers who were fun, had a sense of humor, respected them, empathized, bonded, and related with them, and helped minimize or relieve their stress. The students expected teachers to be sources of excitement, interest, and passion for their subject areas. Such teacher traits foster positive affect in a classroom, which Fredrickson (2001) argues must be present in order for students to emotionally engage with their learning.

Many students spoke of enjoying teachers who modeled positivity in various ways and how it could positively affect their moods. Accordingly, Patrick and Ryan (2001) assert that adolescent students’ emotional engagement depends largely on whether students feel as though
their “teachers value…personal relationships with them” (p.440) and can model mutual respect. Connor and Pope (2013) also show that engagement largely depends on teachers fostering positive relationships in the classroom, while Shernoff, Tonks, and Anderson (2014) identified teachers as the ultimate leaders of the “relational environment” (p. 173) in a classroom. General studies of emotional engagement emphasize the importance of teacher relatedness as well. Skinner and Belmont focused on the importance of establishing a “positive emotional tone” (p. 572) to satisfy “children’s need for relatedness” (p. 572), which is often influenced by “perceptions of teacher behavior toward the child” (p. 573). Studies from Furrer and Skinner (2003), and Lewis, Huebner, Malone, and Valois (2011) also indicate a positive relationship between teacher relatedness and emotional engagement.

However, just as they can be sources of positive affect, teachers can cause negative affect as well. The students spoke of teachers who were grumpy, hypocritical, disrespectful, overly strict, or dispassionate, and recounted anecdotes of ridiculous punishments, overly emotional reactions, and generally poor relationships. Likewise, Marks (2000) has indicated that “dispirited teachers” (p. 155) often go hand in hand with disengaged students. Teachers were also blamed for causing stress, boredom, apathy, and disinterest in a variety of ways. This could be due to teacher-student relationships that are “less personal and positive,” (Eccles et al., 1993, p.93) and place “a greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline” (p. 93) than teacher-student relationships in elementary school. Indeed, in many focus group discussions the students referred back to elementary school as a time when they felt closer to their teachers, and they felt as though their middle school teachers often expected too much of their behavior. This was a common topic for Focus Group 2, arranged under a “Criticism” theme because of their survey responses. They had the highest number of occurrences for the positive interaction with teachers
theme, which suggests that students with more negative outlooks may depend even more on their teachers as sources of positive affect. Conversely, they also had the highest number of responses in the negative interactions with teachers theme, which suggests that they were equally sensitive to teachers who exasperated their moods. More research would be necessary to reach stronger conclusions here, but the findings are in line with the literature (Marks, 2000; Eccles et al., 1993).

It is likely that students were emotionally disengaged from their academics in classrooms in which their teachers caused negative affect, and that this likely negatively affected their cognitive and behavioral engagement. Importantly, as a reflection of the CFMS culture, descriptions of negative emotions and teacher interaction were not as frequent as the positive responses. This suggests that as a whole the teachers who had contact with this group of students were able to emotionally engage them more often than not. This is not surprising since CFMS is a model of effective middle school philosophy in many ways (“Schools to Watch,” n.d.). However, the findings also reveal that students experienced a balanced mix of positive and negative teacher relationships in a building recognized for focusing on adolescents’ social-emotional needs. Balance is actually undesirable though in this situation, because the ideal for emotional engagement would be the positive emotional experiences far outweighing the negatives. Therefore, it is imperative that middle school teachers focus on consistently creating positive affect in their classrooms by forming respectful, empathetic relationships with their students and modeling positivity. This is no less than what adolescents require for fostering emotional engagement.
Importance of Student Autonomy

Thirty-five years ago, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) detailed the tensions that may arise between adolescents and adults because of disagreements about activities that adolescents deem to be worth their time and attention. These tensions still exist today, and are reflected by how the middle students in this study spoke about the importance of choice and positive emotional engagement. In general, they recounted examples of increased positive emotions when they were allowed high levels of autonomy in academic environments and activities, and were displeased when teachers stifled opportunities for choice and asserted too much control. They spoke of being happier when they could choose preferential seating and cooperative learning partners. They explained that assignments were more enjoyable when they could pick their topics, pursue their interests, reflect their senses of self, and control the final product. They valued the freedom they were given by particular teachers to develop and share their own opinions. Some students even connected increased opportunities for choice to overall American values such as freedom of speech.

The idea of student autonomy leading to positive emotional engagement is not new. Dewey wrote over 100 years ago that psychological investment only occurs when students’ “instincts and powers furnish the material” (1897, para. 3), while Marks (2000) drew from Dewey in asserting that engaged individuals are allowed to follow their “natural inclinations” (p. 155). Pursuing chosen, worthwhile activities is a vital component for individuals to experience flow as well. Csikszentmihalyi used the term “autotelic” to describe activities that are worthwhile in and of themselves just “because the experience [is] worth it” (2014, p. xx) for the individual. He and Nakamura (2002) show that students enjoy schoolwork more when they are
allowed “to actively choose and engage in activities related to their own interests and then pursue these activities without imposed demands or pacing” (p. 99). This intentional “support of curiosity and openness” (Bassi, et al., p. 829, 2014) promotes optimal engagement for all adolescents.

A predominant feature of the findings of this study, which is continually shown over the course of this chapter, is the degree to which students’ emotional engagement depends on teachers’ decisions. Just as teachers are models for social relatedness and positive affect in a classroom, their decisions regarding instructional design and classroom climate dictate the amount of autonomy students are allowed to have. The literature shows positive relationships between emotional engagement and teachers who support students’ self-determination (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), increase opportunities for voice and choice (Connor & Pope, 2013), and allow students to work at their own pace (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005) and pursue their intrinsic interests (Shernoff, Tonks & Anderson, 2014). Furthermore, student ownership is a necessary component of Newmann’s (1992) concept of authentic instruction.

Conversely, the findings also reveal that negative emotions, and likely disengagement, resulted from decreased student autonomy. Many students voiced apathetic feelings towards school in general since it as a whole represents something they are forced to do regardless of whether or not they find value in it. Other students shared negative emotional experiences when teachers micromanaged their work, due dates, certain behaviors, or general classroom environments too much. In fact, one of the more evenly dispersed themes in the study was negative emotions in the context of rules, requirements, and expectations. Such descriptions echo what researchers have shown via stage-environment fit theory—that middle school students encounter “[decreased] decision making and choice at a time when the desire for control is
growing” (Eccles et al., p. 94, 1993). Shernoff et al. (2003) also note that while student autonomy is shown to be a key component of optimal learning environments, adult-led, directive teaching still takes up a majority of class time activities in many schools, leaving little room for more student-directed activities. Such decision-making runs counter to the findings in this study which indicated that choice-based projects and general choice in classrooms combined to form a predominant category of positive emotional contexts for these students.

It is clear then that adolescent students are more likely to be emotionally engaged in their schoolwork if they are given more autonomy over the direction the work takes. This not only helps promote flow, but can alleviate some of the inherent social-emotional tension that arises during adolescence, especially with adults. Additionally, autonomy forms part of the triad from self-determination theory, along with relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While self-determination theory focuses more on self-motivation than engagement, it includes “social contexts” (p. 68) as factors that can either “optimize people’s development” (p. 68) or hinder it. Simply, individuals must feel as though they have agency and choice within their social situations in order to fully engage with them. Given that adolescence is partly characterized as a “labyrinth of difficult and confusing choices” (Czikszentmihalyi & Larson, p. 20, 1984), telling middle school students specifically what to do all the time is not helpful to their development or psychological well-being, and may disengage them from their academics. Rather, teachers should embrace this labyrinth and help students navigate it on their own terms by crafting assignments and classroom activities that allow options for how and where to work and afford students opportunities to share their unique perspectives. As the findings show, many students enjoyed writing papers, stories, or poetry, preparing for debates, and other assignments or projects in which they were allowed to choose their own topics, determine the final outcome or
product, and express themselves. In this way, teachers can still craft schoolwork to challenge students and assess skill levels, but balance the academic purpose of the work with an appeal to students’ social-emotional needs and psychological development as well.

**Importance of Authentic Instruction**

While the findings reveal that the middle school students spoke of positive interactions with peers and teachers and increased autonomy separately, they are linked to the vehicle through which all teacher choices are delivered: instructional design. Through properly designed instruction, teachers can specifically tailor learning activities for mid-adolescents that allow for social interaction and increased choice. Furthermore, a teacher’s tone, which greatly influences the affect in a classroom, is a pedagogical choice. In addition to these positive emotional elements, the middle school students in this study spoke of other specific features of instructional design that inspired optimal engagement: authenticity, active learning, and creativity.

Newmann (1992) asserts that instruction must be authentic in order for students to engage with it. Authentic school work is “considered meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one’s effort” (p. 23). While these characteristics may be attributed to many things, authenticity usually includes some combination of extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interests, and real world connections (Newmann, 1992). The findings of this studied revealed the middle school students experienced greater positive emotions when these aspects of authentic instruction were present. Students spoke of enjoyable assignments that had clear connections to real world current events, social or cultural issues, or generally interesting topics. Other students spoke of feeling more engaged with their work when they knew it would be applicable to their future goals, such as post-high school education or specific occupations, or when worthwhile external motivators were
present. This supports Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter’s (2003) indication that clear connections to goals and values counteract the inherently demotivating experience of schoolwork, while Newmann (1992) and Bishop and Pflaum (2005) assert that engagement only occurs when schoolwork seems relevant to students’ interests, goals, and values.

Assignments must have clear connections to students’ intrinsic interests for them to be as authentic and engaging as possible. If adolescents have developed strong opinions on the types of activities that they find to be worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), then it follows that students’ engagement rises or falls depending on their interest and value in the work (Shernoff, Knauth, & Makris, 2001). If schoolwork does not meet these characteristics of authenticity, students are like to find it “nonsensical, useless, contrived, trivial, and therefore unworthy of effort” (Newmann, p. 23). Indeed, the majority of the apathetic feelings the middle school students shared in this study were attributed to inauthentic schoolwork – i.e. work without clear goals, purpose, meaning, or relevance to their lives. In some cases, students were even downright spiteful about having to endure such learning experiences. These are clear signs of emotional disengagement, and it is likely students were not inspired to think or work hard on such assignments. This was a key feature of the Focus Group 2 discussion—a group which showed signs of emotional disengagement to begin with in their survey responses.

Interest is a key feature of both Shernoff’s (2013) optimal learning environments and Newmann’s (1992) authentic instruction. Enjoyment and interest must occur simultaneously, along with challenge, for students to be highly emotionally engaged with their work. According to the students’ responses, they recognized both authentic educational experiences at CFMS, and inauthentic ones. This means that to more consistently engage students at the highest level, teachers should ensure that their instructional design is as authentic as possible by establishing
clear connections between subject area content, real world issues, and students’ interests. In fact, student autonomy and authentic instruction are natural partners towards increased emotional engagement. Through allowing increased autonomy, teachers can allow students to seek authenticity on their own.

**Importance of Active Learning and Creativity**

Some of the educational field’s most influential thinkers have argued for the importance of active learning in academic environments. Dewey wrote, among other things, that education must “coincide with the child’s activity” (1897, para. 3), while Tyler (2013) asserted that teachers must establish learning environments that “set up stimulating situations” (p. 64). Active learning is central to studies of both emotional engagement (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005) and flow in school (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). These studies show that students are more likely to be emotionally engaged if their enjoyment and interest levels are triggered by seatwork (Shernoff, Knauth, & Makris, 2001), or hands-on, project-based, or cooperative learning strategies. Finn (1989; Finn & Voekel, 1993) also shows that students who are inspired to actively participate in academics have increased relatedness, positive affect, and self-identification with the school community and are less likely to become disengaged. Newmann (1992) supports Finn’s assertion that students must be stimulated to direct their effort towards authentic instruction, while Shernoff, Tonks, and Anderson (2014) include a heightened “sense of participation” (p.170) in their characteristics of optimal learning environments.

The findings of this study support the importance of active learning in fostering emotional engagement for middle school students. The students associated positive emotions
with learning environments that featured interactive or hands-on learning strategies, such as cooperative learning, discussions, in-class writing time, or conducting research or labs. Many students explained they enjoyed their exploratory, music, and physical education classes more than their core classes simply because of the increased amount of activity, which supports the previous literature (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Shernoff, Knauth, & Makris, 2001). Furthermore, the students often closely linked increased activity with opportunities to show creativity. They spoke positively of creating products to demonstrate their learning, such as a writing piece, diorama, multi-media presentation, or poster—each an example of activity, creativity, and choice occurring together. These were such common examples of enjoyable schoolwork that choice-based projects became its own positive emotions theme. Moreover, activity and creativity held a great deal of personal meaning for these students as many of them self-identified as athletes, musicians, dancers, or artists in various forms. Opportunities to be active and creative piqued students’ interests, fostered enjoyment, and allowed students to use their unique skills to meet the challenge of an assignment—the exact prerequisites for flow to occur. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has shown the direct connection between creativity and optimal engagement. The importance of creativity, however, is still an ongoing area of educational research perhaps because it is often closely connected to other more widely studied educational phenomena such as interest and value as indicated in these students’ responses.

If activity and creativity are associated with optimal emotional engagement, it follows that a lack of activity or creativity may lead to disengagement. Indeed, the highest occurring negative emotions theme and second highest occurring theme in the entire setting was boredom from academic settings. This high number of occurrences and its even dispersion between the focus groups supports indications from Yazzie-Mintz (2006) and Pekrun et al. (2010) that
boredom is the most widely experienced negative emotion in school settings. In this study, boredom mostly occurred in inactive instructional contexts—i.e. sitting and listening to teachers for too long, copying notes from PowerPoint, or a lack of interaction with teachers and peers. Students also linked boredom to disinterest in particular subject areas and too much repetition of content or the same learning strategies such as reading textbooks or completing worksheets. Two of the three theories included in the framework for this study conceptualize boredom as a negative emotional result of mismatched learning environments. In flow theory, boredom is theorized as the result of learning environments that offer challenges that are too low compared to students’ skill levels (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Shernoff et al., 2014). It follows then that students would be bored if not enough is expected of them during instructional time, such as copying down what a teacher says. Furthermore, control value theory (Pekrun, 2006) contends that students must positively appraise academic activities for value and interest in order for boredom to be avoided. This means that learning activities for adolescents must be properly designed to avoid boredom by properly matching the level of challenge with students’ abilities, and helping students find value and interest in the work.

Accordingly, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen (1997) have laid the causes of boredom at the feet of teachers for too often presenting information in ways that are uninteresting to students. The talent of effective teaching is to “evoke the kind of behavior desired” (Tyler, 2013, p. 64) from students, but it is unlikely that teachers desire their students to be bored in class. Yet boredom is still pervasive (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006), students are rarely given “opportunities for action and to demonstrate their skills” (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 134), and many teachers still rely on instructional strategies that leave “little room for active engagement” (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 171). Meanwhile, the negative consequences of boredom
to adolescents’ psychological development (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) as well as their academic behaviors and subsequent achievement (Tze, Daniels, & Klassen, 2015) have been clearly documented. This is perplexing given that the solutions to avoid boredom have been just as extensively documented, and yet these solutions seem to require further emphasis. If teachers would design their instruction to require activity, inspire creativity and interest, and challenge students appropriately, enjoyment and emotional engagement are more likely and boredom is less likely.

Preventing Emotional Disengagement

This study asserts that two separate bi-directional relationships exist between positive emotions, optimal engagement, and psychological well-being (see Figure 1). Meaning, experiencing positive emotions helps students engage with their learning environments, while optimal learning environments further inspire positive affect. This relationship leads to increased psychological well-being, while psychological well-being leads to the likelihood of positive emotions and experiencing optimal engagement in learning environments. This cycle encapsulates emotional engagement for adolescents, and disengagement from academics is likely if this cycle is disrupted. As the findings in this study indicated, the middle school students responses reflected various components of this cycle in individualized contexts—variations of positive emotions such as enjoyment and interest, examples of engaging classrooms, teachers, and assignments, and suggestions of psychological well-being. These occurred in slightly different combinations depending on the individual student or nature of a focus group meeting. However, certain combinations of emotions and contexts occurred more than others, and these formed the basis of the major findings for this group of students at CFMS. In total, the positive
emotions themes indicated students enjoy school more when they can interact with their friends, form positive relationships with their teachers, and are given relevant, interesting, creative, hands-on assignments that they have some control over.

Just as important however were the findings that indicated when negative emotions occurred for these students in certain academic contexts. Adolescence is an ongoing, daily experience and it is likely that struggles that occurred outside of CFMS academic environments may have caused some students to share overly negative feelings that cannot necessarily be attributed to instructional practices. But the “Sturm und Drang” (Muuss, p. 34, 1968) of adolescence is exactly the reason why inspiring positive affect in academic settings is so critical, as stage environment fit theory indicates (Eccles et al., 1993). If school causes additional negative feelings, compounding the negativity that often accompanies such a trying time of life, it is exactly the opposite of what students this age require when positive development is so vital to their future fulfillment and happiness (Csikszenmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

And yet, the findings of this study show situations in which teaching and learning practices indeed caused further negative emotions for these students. In addition to the high occurrences of boredom caused by inactivity and apathy caused largely by inauthenticity, students indicated that particular academic situations caused additional stress and anxiety. Stress and anxiety from schoolwork was the second highest occurring negative emotions theme and the third highest occurring in the entire study, with nearly the same amount of occurrences as boredom in academic settings. The findings reveal that stress and anxiety occurred in the context of different subject areas, depending on the student and how difficult the class was. A few students shared experiences with test anxiety or feeling as though they did not have enough time to prepare for assessments. Time allowed by teachers to complete work was a sizeable sub-
context for stress and anxiety, whether it was the length of time given for test preparation or to complete a particular assignment or project. Many students explicitly blamed their teachers for causing them stress based on due date requirements and not respecting their time after school. In fact, multitasking was the largest sub-context for stress, as the students indicated that expectations to balance homework and their after school activities, and even between different homework assignments from separate subject areas, was too much for them. Many students indicated that they could not do their best work and they feared getting bad grades because they were being rushed through so many separate assignments and activities. The amount of multitasking even affected students’ sleep patterns, and one student even admitted dishonesty with his parents in order to stay up late enough to complete his work.

Flow theory identifies stress as a form of disengagement that occurs when a person feels that his skill-ability does not adequately match the level of a challenge (Shernoff et al., 2003), while control-value theory also includes stress and anxiety as negative achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). It is clear that many students in this study encountered academic situations in which they felt too much was being asked of them, especially regarding the time given to complete or prepare for academic tasks, or the amount of activity they were expected to fit into a certain time frame. Some may consider a certain amount of stress and anxiety from schoolwork and multitasking between activities to be inevitable, and that this prepares students for the rigors of high school, college, or adulthood. However, this viewpoint requires revision, as schoolwork which creates additional stress or any other negative emotions for adolescents, especially when such side-effects are easily avoidable, should be considered unacceptable educational practice.

Connor and Pope (2013) indicate that emotional engagement is rare when compared to the other engagement constructs—behavioral and cognitive. Furthermore, Wang and Peck (2013)
show that emotional disengagement is possible even amongst high-performing students who show positive signs of behavioral and cognitive engagement. In their study, these emotionally disengaged students had the “highest risk of mental health problems” (p. 1271) and “fit least well into the school context” (p. 1271). This level of emotional disengagement may even negatively affect students’ post-high school plans (Wang & Peck, 2013). These studies show that students may participate in class and other school functions, behave well, and even put thoughtful effort into their assignments. Yet, they may still become emotionally disengaged from their academics, damaging their development and psychological well-being. Achievement should not be considered the ultimate outcome of instructional practices, nor should cognitive and behavioral engagement be emphasized over emotional engagement. Properly designed instructional practices must include emotional engagement at their core, with overall psychological well-being considered the guiding objective and achievement a subsequent benefit.

The tendency to overlook emotional engagement may explain why engagement begins to decline in middle school and continues to drop throughout high school (Gallup, 2016). This indicates a need for further study of emotional engagement for mid-adolescents as many engagement studies continue to focus on high school students. There were middle school students in this study who showed clear signs of emotional disengagement in various contexts. Two eighth grade focus groups in particular—Groups 1 and 2—shared far more negative emotional contexts than the other groups. With Group 2, this was expected given their “Criticism” theme, and as previously noted they had the highest number in the negativity or apathy for school theme. Group 1, however, had the highest totals for both boredom and stress and anxiety from schoolwork. This is intriguing given that this group was organized around students who indicated strong engagement experiences in their survey responses. Furthermore,
Group 1 consisted of students who were in advanced ELA and math classes, reflecting the literature on high-performing students who nevertheless may become emotionally disengaged (Wang & Peck, 2013). Further data collection of a more personal nature would be necessary to confirm whether or not the students from these two groups could be considered mostly emotionally disengaged, and whether factors outside of academic environments may have contributed to the nature of their responses. Comparatively, these were also the two groups that had the most responses in some of the positive emotion themes as well, which shows the complexity of emotional engagement and how it occurs on a continuum depending on individuals and contexts. This indicates that students who are more self-aware of what engages them may also be more likely to understand what disengages them. These connections offer further support for the research that emphasizes the necessity of balancing emotional and cognitive support in middle school classrooms (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2014).

The complexity of middle school students’ emotional engagement is reflected within the top five highest occurring themes in this study. Tables 3 and 4 show that negative emotion themes were second, third, and fourth overall, while positive emotion themes were first and fifth. These results encompass the issue of how precarious fostering emotional engagement can be for this age group. Although CFMS is recognized as a model proponent of the middle school philosophy, improvement is still needed in consistently promoting positive affect for all students and avoiding emotional disengagement. This is likely the case for many other middle schools as well.
Limitations

While the overall design of this study is strong, it is not without limitations. To begin with, sampling choices affected the limits of the study in several ways. The sample of middle school students was taken from a convenient research site that does not reflect overall national demographic averages. The sample was also not evenly distributed between the two grades levels used to represent the age group, nor were there an equal amount of male and female participants. This study depended on students volunteering both to participate and to offer information through the surveys and focus group discussions. Their choices to participate, offer information, and how to frame that information could have been based on particular positive or negative biases towards school that would have been reduced with a more randomized sampling method. My status as a teacher in the building could also have affected which students chose to volunteer and what they decided to tell me. I depended on other teachers and the social services staff to help me recruit more volunteers, which meant their relationships with students affected who participated. As with most research studies, a larger sample of students would have further strengthened the findings and may have captured additional nuances and themes. These sampling choices limit the transferability of the findings.

The study was conducted within a limited time frame of one school year with three qualitative data collection procedures. While a large majority of volunteers participated in the first two rounds of data, most did not participate in the follow-up survey. Additional data, such as more individualized academic characteristics, longitudinal data, or a mixed-methods approach with additional quantitative data, would clarify some of the findings even further. The data collected were anecdotal and based on students’ recollections of past experiences and contextual
feelings. This approach did not capture the environmental immediacy of engagement which may have been further clarified through observational methods. Furthermore, the quality of the middle school students’ responses was affected by their ability and willingness to articulate abstract thoughts on their emotions in certain contexts, both verbally and in writing. The questions used in the survey seemed to confuse some students, and some did not talk as much as others during the focus group meetings. While the social support of the focus group meetings seemed to energize some students and boost their confidence, it seemed to have the opposite effect on other students who may have shared more information in a less socially interactive setting such as a one-one-one interview. Some students also had a tendency to dominate the focus group discussions, when equally balanced discussions between the participants would have been ideal. Furthermore, the system used to compile and present the data—by total occurrences for a particular theme—somewhat flattened out the responses. In other words, a student may have had a particularly strong feeling or elaborate explanation for an academic context, and yet intensity of feeling or quality of response did not factor into the total occurrences system. Focus group discussions were also limited to the time allowed during one lunch period, ranging from 30 to 37 minutes long.

Finally, the focus on emotional engagement itself is a limitation. As with any study of educational processes, a theoretical framework may cause a degree of tunnel vision and a purposeful ignorance of other factors. Fredricks et al. (2005) suggest that an engagement study must not separate any of the three constructs of engagement—cognitive, behavioral, or emotional—from one another or risk dichotomizing aspects which are “dynamically embedded within a single individual” (p. 306). Fredricks et al. (2004) also warn of the complexity of engagement studies “can result in a proliferation of constructs, definitions, and measures” (p.
This study however did not seek to definitively separate emotional engagement from students’ cognition and behaviors, but rather to ask students about their emotions in certain academic contexts and then analyze the implications of their responses. The findings indicated that their subsequent feelings about school and schoolwork likely affected their behavior and thinking. This approach was taken based on suggestions from the same authors (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2005) that ideal emotional conditions likely mediate increased cognition and desirable academic behaviors, their suggestion that flow theory can provide a “conceptualization… [of] high emotional involvement or investment” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63), and experiential knowledge of adolescent students.

Recommendations to the Field of Education

The findings of this study indicate several areas in which emotional engagement can be addressed more effectively for middle school students. While the major implications are mostly for teachers and classroom practices, the findings may also be applicable for school administrators, teacher preparation programs, and even middle school students themselves.

Recommendations for Teachers

The most direct recommendations for this study are for teachers. Undoubtedly, students expect teachers to positively shape their academic experiences. In this study the middle school students were able to clearly articulate the pedagogical choices and characteristics of learning environments that fostered positive emotional engagement and those that did not. Quite simply, the most effective teachers for mid-adolescents are those who can consistently emotionally engage their students at the highest level. The final themes (see Tables 3. and 4.) can be viewed
in another way: as a middle school teachers’ checklist of emotional engagement goals for lesson planning. Pedagogical choices that appeal to the following positive emotion themes in simultaneous combinations are more likely to facilitate increased emotional engagement for middle school students: (a) establishing positive social interaction between students; (b) personally relating to students; (c) active learning; (d) assignments which are authentic, hands-on, long term, and appeal to students’ interests and creativity; and (e) increasing student autonomy over assignments and classroom activities.

Likewise, and perhaps equally importantly for this age group, teachers must anticipate the possibility of negative emotional responses from students and strategize ways to minimize and counter the following: (a) boredom in the classroom; (b) natural apathy towards school; (c) negative emotions from peer and teacher interaction; and (d) additional stress and anxiety because of schoolwork. More specifically, teachers must foster positive affect for middle school students by maintaining a positive tone, consciously avoiding too many outward signs of negative emotions, and balancing rules, requirements, expectations, with student autonomy. Since engagement and disengagement are individualized within the present moment and circumstances, teachers must prepare for situations in which some students become disengaged while others may be completely enjoying their work. Such situations are precisely why facilitating optimal emotional engagement requires strategizing for lesson complexity beforehand, and why allowing for increased student interest, creativity, and autonomy is effective.

While such choices are likely to lead to increased enjoyment and interest in academic activities, Shernoff (2013) reminds us that truly engaging work requires a combination of precisely leveled challenges with heightened positive emotions. It is this environmental
complexity of simultaneously heightened interest, enjoyment, and challenge that inspires the very highest levels of engagement in classroom settings. This means that a middle school teacher should craft a lesson plan with three overall approaches in mind—appealing to students’ positive emotions, minimizing negative emotional reactions, and ensuring that the level of challenge presented to students is precisely aligned with their skill abilities. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of engagement to facilitate since skill levels are individualized by each student. It suggests that teachers must deeply understand both the developmental tendencies of the age group they teach and the current skill levels of each student pertaining to the subject area. By differentiating for challenge and then appealing to students’ positive emotions, negative emotions should be minimized and optimal engagement is likely. It further suggests that teachers still have a responsibility to craft classroom activities that pose specific challenges to inspire students rather than overwhelm them, that are interactive rather than inactive, and that appeal to students’ strengths and talents while also facilitating skill development.

In general, the students in this study appreciated the opportunity to openly share their views on their learning experiences. Though their responses certainly reflected personal biases, they agreed with each other on particular emotional contexts more than they disagreed, and were genuinely honest and forthright about their day to day school lives. They did not seem to share their experiences with a hidden agenda in mind. This suggests that teachers themselves, not just educational researchers, should build in opportunities for students to give feedback on class activities. Such experiential data could be applied towards future lesson planning to ensure for increased levels of emotional engagement. Given that engagement largely depends on teachers’ choices, open dialogue with students about pedagogy not only increases their autonomy in the
decision making process, but makes it more likely that teachers will meet the needs and wants of the educational consumers in their classrooms.

**Recommendations for School Administrators**

The findings of this study also have implications for school administrators, specifically in their roles in hiring and evaluating teachers, crafting professional development experiences, and fostering a positive building-level tone. While administrators do not have as much direct contact with students as teachers, oversight is necessary in a few key areas to consistently engage middle school students.

When hiring new teachers, administrators should require applicants to explain their educational philosophy for the age group they are seeking to teach. Middle school teaching applicants should be able to clearly articulate strategies for fostering engagement. Teaching scenarios and follow-up questions could be used as well to foresee how an applicant would approach emotional engagement and craft optimal learning environments. For example, an interviewer could ask, “How do you craft assignments and lessons to optimally engage students?” or “What role do students’ emotions have in whether or not they are engaged with their work?” As a scenario, an interviewer could pose, “What do you do if you notice students becoming bored with a lesson?” Furthermore, similar expectations should apply to current employees as well and become a larger component of teacher evaluations. The Charlotte Danielson model, currently the basis for evaluating teachers at CFMS and many other schools across the country, includes domains for The Classroom Environment and Instruction and even a sub-rating for Engaging Students in Learning. However, when compared to the pedagogical complexity an emotionally engaging learning environment demands, these domains are grossly
inadequate to properly rate how effectively a middle school teacher engages students. A teacher’s ability to engage students should be evaluated based on the same three previously stated goals for instructional design: positive emotional appeals, preventing negative emotional reactions, and properly balancing challenge with students’ skill levels. In addition, given that engagement is a qualitative experience, students’ views on their educational experiences should not only be welcomed by teachers, but should also become a component of teachers’ final evaluations. Though perhaps a controversial idea, observing a whole class does not capture whether individual students are optimally engaged. And yet, most teacher evaluations are based on administrators observing teachers working with students in a classroom, bookended by before and after meetings to explain and receive feedback on the lesson. However, at least part of a teacher’s proficiency rating should be based on information gathered directly from the students who actually have to experience a lesson and are affected the most by its success or failure. This information could be gathered through open-ended or quantitative surveys, or a combination of each. Students in lower grade levels should be given the same opportunity as college students to evaluate their instructors.

To help remedy issues with engagement, or simply assist all teachers in continually improving their teaching practices, administrators should provide professional development with engagement as a clear focus. Furthermore, possible professional development vendors must be scrutinized to ensure that their offerings truly capture and convey the essence of engagement without further diminishing it as an advertising buzzword for particular educational products. Engagement cannot be guaranteed or promised simply because a teacher might choose to purchase a certain resource or use a certain technology application. Fostering engagement is a complex, ongoing undertaking in which there are no easy answers or magic buttons. It requires
multiple emotional, cognitive, and behavior processes to be optimized simultaneously. Proper professional development should not try to make facilitating engagement seem easy since that only minimizes its importance. If the skill-challenge balance is vital for students’ engagement, it is equally vital for engaging teachers in their professional development, which is too often viewed as an inconsequential nuisance. Perhaps the key is to challenge teachers to focus on emotional engagement in their pedagogy by determining where their current knowledge and skills are on the topic, and then encouraging them to implement whatever next steps seem appropriate. Decision making towards improving students’ emotional engagement should be done in cooperation with student services, who should help teachers integrate social-emotional appeals into their lesson plans and intervene with students in cases of severe emotional disengagement.

If students depend on their teachers to foster positive affect in a classroom, then the trickle down-effect begins with the administrators in charge of middle school buildings—principals, assistant or vice principals, and deans of students. If students look to teachers for positive affect, teachers certainly look to adults in positions of authority to do the same for them. Positive tone is not as easy to measure as test scores or PBIS referrals, but it may be more important for a middle school building. While much of fostering positive affect may depend on teacher friendships, relatedness begins with those in charge and how they present themselves in front of the staff, run committees and leadership meetings, resolve conflicts, interact with others in the hallway, and respect other staff members. Modeling positive interaction sets an expectation for the building that students deserve to be surrounded by caring staff members who offer the best possible emotional support.
Recommendations for Teacher Preparation Programs

The findings of this study further suggest that college teacher preparation programs must ensure that graduates develop knowledge and approaches to effectively engage students. Specifically, colleges of education should increase the requirements for psychology classes towards obtain a teaching certificate and create more classes devoted solely to studying the complexities of engagement. It is imperative that future teachers craft philosophies of education that include not just passion for particular subject areas and what being a teacher would mean to them, but more importantly direct statements of how to engage students in their work. Since optimal engagement is so dependent on matching properly designed instruction with the developmental characteristics of the students in the room, future teachers need as much practice as possible in synthesizing classroom management techniques, instructional design approaches, and students’ developmental needs. Just as full-time teachers should be evaluated based on a more nuanced understanding of engagement, future-teachers should be critiqued the same way during their classroom observations and model lessons. Pre-service teacher supervisors should require future teachers to explain their engagement strategies during pre-observation meetings, and give specific feedback on engagement after observing the lesson. Pre-service teachers should also strategize beforehand ways to counteract possible negative emotional responses from students, and students’ feedback should be sought on the effectiveness of pre-service teachers’ lessons as well.

More specifically, future teachers of adolescents must understand the powerful influence they have on positive and negative affect in a classroom, and how emotional engagement mediates the effectiveness of any learning activity. Teachers begin the profession with clear
abilities to manage behavior and ensure that students are on task. They may even know a lot about their subject area and be able to plan lessons with direct skill applications that require higher level critical thinking. But each of these aspects of engagement—behavioral and cognitive—is likely to falter if not combined with a respectful and positive tone, interaction and relatedness, and direct appeals to students’ enjoyment, interest, creativity, and autonomy. Future middle school teachers need to practice developing lessons that include these emotional engagement components in simultaneous combinations. In this way, future teachers must understand that engagement is more than a room full of on-task students, but rather of students who actually care about their work, enjoy it, and want to keep getting better at it.

In this way as well, future teachers need advice on managing their emotions. This is an aspect of the occupation that is difficult to anticipate and plan for, but is equally important to applying learning and behavioral strategies. Teaching is an emotionally taxing job, in which one person must hold the attention of 25 or more students in one class, probably hundreds over the course of a day, continually progress through an agreed upon curriculum in a finite amount of time, and ensure that each student’s learning needs are met along the way. These demands occur day after day, irrespective of whatever else may be happening in a teacher’s life. But no matter how much stress a teacher feels, allowing it to affect the classroom environment should be avoided. Yelling at students or allowing any level of resentment to creep into feelings about individual students may seem inevitable, and are not entirely unforgivable should they occur. However, such consequences are unproductive at the very least and make the already complicated task of fostering emotional engagement even more difficult. At the very worst, students who are already struggling with emotional disengagement may be further damaged in unexpected and irreversible ways. Fostering emotional engagement means understanding the
developmental characteristics of an age group and crafting academic activities that closely reflect
their needs and wants. All students need and want their teachers to care about them and value
their time, and teacher preparation programs should place more emphasis on the emotional side
of teaching. Not only does this benefit the students, but it makes the job more enjoyable and
engaging as well.

Recommendations for Students

Finally, though they will receive direct benefits from more emotionally engaging learning
experiences, middle school students are certainly not mere bystanders or vessels in their
educational process. Though adolescence throws many obstacles at students, and these obstacles
must be understood by their teachers, it also falls upon students to take advantage of academic
situations in which teachers are properly appealing to their emotional engagement. Students need
to recognize when teachers purposefully design learning activities that value their time. Students
need to take advantage of chances to be active and creative, or to connect learning with personal
interests or social issues, or discuss learning and interact with classmates, or being given control
over the final product for an assignment. It is also likely that middle school students who develop
clear interests and engage in desirable activities outside of school find it easier to engage with
schoolwork at a high level. This suggests that open and honest dialogue between students and
their parents about how to best nurture and pursue interests, hobbies, and talents can further build
students’ capacity to engage with their schoolwork.

Though teachers certainly can be blamed for not adequately preventing boredom, apathy,
or stress, these are also natural emotional side effects that all people will encounter in
unappealing situations throughout their lives. Even if a teacher is a direct cause of negative
emotions, middle school students should view such a relationship as an opportunity for social-emotional learning. It is not possible to completely prevent negative emotional reactions to people or situations, but it is possible to be more empathetic or to take such situations less personally. Teachers are not perfect, and must balance not only the demands of the students they serve, but also of other teachers, administrators, and from life at home or outside of school. Such competing demands make it likely that teachers’ emotional states will fluctuate throughout a school year and that every lesson may not be the perfect learning experience. If possible, middle school students should find ways to initiate dialogue with their teachers and give respectful, honest feedback to address emotional fluctuations or how to engage them more consistently. For example, this might be accomplished by sending a teacher an email through the school Gmail system, or simply letting a teacher know when a lesson or assignment was especially enjoyable. This may seem risky and that it would be overstepping a students’ role, but fostering optimal emotional engagement demands revision of the traditional teacher-student relationship, and courage from teachers and students to embrace the challenge of creating emotionally engaging learning experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the findings of this study have strong implications for teaching practice and policy regarding middle school students, additional research would strengthen and clarify the claims. Many of the recommendations for future research are based on this study’s limitations, in which participants volunteered from one middle school building and qualitative research was conducted in two data collection procedures over the course of one school year. A similar study but with additional participants taken from more middle school buildings would broaden the demographic
base and offer a more complex collection of perspectives in comparing responses from multiple communities. Additionally, if other buildings were more demographically diverse then it would be possible to compare responses between different socio-economic, cultural, and racial demographic groups.

This study would have been further strengthened with the addition of other data collection procedures. While the focus groups provided social support and a way to collect a large amount of data over the course of a relatively short meeting, future researchers should combine this method with one-on-one interviews. These could be used to follow-up or clarify students’ focus group statements, or ask questions that were left out due to time constraints or that students may not have felt comfortable answering in front of their peers. Some students would also be more naturally comfortable in a quieter, less chaotic research setting. Other qualitative methods could be utilized to triangulate data as well, such as artifact analysis, video recordings of students or classrooms, or other observational strategies. These could be used to clarify how emotional engagement intercedes with behavior and cognition more precisely, or how it is encapsulated in certain assignments or activities. If a researcher could gain access to more personal information on students, such as mental health or home environments, this would add another set of qualities for layered analysis.

If, as theorized, emotional engagement benefits students in the present and in the future, then a longitudinal study would clarify how students’ emotional engagement has been positively or negatively affected over a period of years. In this case, data were collected over a few months, and were limited to how students were feeling about their school experiences within a specific timeframe of their lives. If this study had been conducted with multiple focus group meetings spread throughout the school year, it would have not been restricted to what students were able
to share in one meeting would have encompassed additional academic experiences. If this same study was conducted with the same participants at points in the future, this would offer a comparison of engagement perspectives through middle school and into high school. Furthermore, if such a study were begun in elementary school and students were contacted at points along the way as they moved through school buildings, it could provide an emotional engagement angle to clarify why overall engagement levels trend downward as students age.

Furthermore, a mixed-methods approach may be an effective way to further investigate and clarify students’ emotional engagement, especially regarding their achievement in specific content areas or academic tasks. A comparison of what students share about their emotional engagement in a particular class combined with how they are performing in that class could further define the connection between feelings, thoughts, academic behaviors and achievement. Or, if students were to fill out Experience Sampling Forms through an Experience Sampling Method study, and then participate in a combination of surveys, focus group meetings, or interviews, the data from the ESFs could offer numerical precision as an empirical foundation. Other quantitative engagement instruments are available as well, often based on Likert-type scales, and could be combined with qualitative methods.

The nature of the research design for this study meant that a number of intriguing topics were revealed that for various reasons could not be included as major findings. The focus groups themes themselves, ascertained from the students’ survey responses, yielded natural conversations about emotional engagement in particular contexts such as volunteering for others (Focus Group 3) or participating in athletics (Focus Group 4). In one case, the students struggled to articulate their experiences in writing (Focus Group 5), but could clearly verbalize them during a group meeting. Other focus groups shared information more readily and worded their
opinions more strongly than the other groups (Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2). These findings suggest that the characteristics of the focus group participants contributed to the quality and nature of their explanations. In each case, the focus group theme could be further explored as a context for emotional engagement with more students who share the same characteristic. With only two seventh grade groups included here (Focus Group 6, Focus Group 7), their specific age experience warrants additional exploration as well. For a topical example, many students referred to sleep or feeling tired at school. While certainly associated with how they felt at school, it seemed that there was not enough specificity to what they said and that sleep and tiredness would need much further exploration to truly determine their effects on emotional engagement. Continuing to pursue these topics with additional data collection could further contribute to the emotional engagement literature.

Conclusion

In reviewing the theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, and findings for this study, I noticed that I seemed to purposefully minimize the use of a particular term: motivation. This was not from my recollection a conscious decision, although it was probably prompted by the warnings previous researchers have given about the complexity of engagement studies and how the term has often been misused and jumbled together with other educational processes. Indeed, motivation and engagement interact with one another in important ways, but also represent two distinct psychological factors towards how students approach their academic experiences and why they make particular choices.

From what I can ascertain, motivation in education represents what a student wants or hopes to gain from their academic choices. They may have intrinsic motivation for a particular
subject area or activity, or they may not. They may be motivated by particular external benefits that will result from their academic choices, or they may not. They may in fact be motivated to not put effort into their schoolwork because they somehow gain from that decision. Labeling students unmotivated then becomes problematic; all students are motivated in different ways. They may just not be motivated by what is currently presented to them as options for academic activities.

And yet, too often I have heard educators blame students for a lack of motivation to explain, and perhaps excuse, underachievement—i.e. a student is not turning in their work because they are unmotivated, or a student is getting a C instead of an A because they do not have intrinsic motivation for a particular subject area. Admittedly, teachers can only positively influence students’ motivation to a certain degree, but by using motivational issues as a crutch we are not accepting personal responsibility for the fact that schoolwork itself is inherently demotivating (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This labeling and blaming forms a cycle of abdicating responsibility for students’ achievement while continuing the same teaching strategies that may be partly at fault for students’ demotivation in the first place.

Student engagement, however, is completely within a teacher’s capacity to control and may play a more predominant role than motivation in educational processes. Not only does optimal engagement mediate achievement, but consistent engagement can build the very lack of intrinsic or external motivation that many teachers dwell upon. Students benefit socially and emotionally from engaging experiences as well, beyond positive correlations with motivation and achievement. Engagement is immediate and environmentally driven by the quality of the conditions and activities available in a particular setting and whether or not they are worth
paying attention to. Creating academic environments for mid-adolescent students which are worth paying attention to inarguably depends on their teachers’ pedagogical choices.

And yet, the positive emotional conditions that are necessary to inspire heightened combinations of interest, enjoyment, and challenge (Shernoff, 2013) for middle school students are often grossly neglected, to say nothing of treating Fredrickson’s (2001) positive emotional “flourishing” as equaling important to learning. Building positive social-emotional foundations for students not only helps them engage with their schoolwork, but also assists with other aspects of life that lead to fulfillment and happiness. Cultivating happiness is not just a means to an end in the present moment, but a sustained, life-long pursuit. It is difficult to argue that students learn how to be happy by solely focusing on achievement scores and remedying weaknesses. Noddings’ (2004) collection of what makes us truly happy in life—family, work, personal growth, seeking proper surroundings, and community involvement—are self-driven, complex, qualitative, and socially-integrated. Perhaps most importantly, they are also things we have to learn how to be good at so we can fully engage with them. It is another reflection of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson’s (1984) “life theme”— that learning how to fully engage in socially integrated activities and institutions represents a human triumph.

In 2000, Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman (2000) were asked to write the introduction for the January 2000 issue of *American Psychologist*, which would be devoted to the positive psychology movement. In it, Seligman recalls a realization he had after yelling at his five-year-old daughter while she helped pull weeds in their garden. He writes, “I am goal oriented and time urgent, and when I’m weeding in the garden, I’m actually trying to get the weeding done. Nicki, however, was throwing weeds into the air, singing, and dancing around” (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, p. 5). He continues, “Raising children, I realized, is vastly more than fixing what is
wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths” (p. 6). He and Csikszentmihalyi conclude with a message for psychologists that could be easily reinterpreted for teachers: “Practitioners need to recognize that much of the best work they already do…is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients” (p. 8). They vow to steer psychology in the direction of “building positive qualities, [such as] well-being, contentment, and satisfaction; hope and optimism; and flow and happiness “(p. 5). 

Given the intertwining of educational and psychological processes, teachers must ask ourselves: Are we amplifying the strengths of our students, rather than just focusing on repairing their weaknesses? And in attempting to amplify their strengths, are we going about it the right way, or are we actually making educational decisions that stifle students in an already demotivating environment? Or put an analogous way—Are we yelling at them for singing and dancing while pulling weeds in the garden?

Much like an adolescent determining what to value in life, a school system must do the same. Some policymakers, administrators, and teachers choose to value the performance and achievement side of academics. However, students and parents often have a different view as Shernoff (2012) indicates:

The list of things that most parents want for their children include happiness, confidence, balance, health, and kindness—in other words, developmental, psychological, and emotional well-being…The list has almost no overlap with the list of things parents describe schools as actually emphasizing—achievement, success, conformity, and subject content (p. 198).

During adolescence, a stormy period of life, parents and students are still likely to agree on what schools should emphasize. Yet of all the enlightening, insightful student quotes collected over the course of this study, one phrase has stuck with me the most. Kate, a seventh grade student,
stated matter-of-factly, “School is sort of just an emotion in itself,” and explained, “It's not really happy for me, but it's not really sad or angry. It's sort of just like nothing. It's just school. It's just something I do every day and that's required of me.” It is not an overly negative or positive explanation, but it is starkly honest in its complete lack of emotion. It could easily be rephrased, I just go to school every day because I have to, and I don’t feel anything about it. While teenagers are prone to hyperbole, they are also keenly observant and brutally honest, and their opinions about their schooling experiences ought to be considered. It is likely that Kate’s opinion is not an outlier and that many other students have a similar blasé, uninspired view of their academic experiences. How can students be expected to think or behave at optimal levels if they are just going through the academic motions? We must move past the tired misconception that this is normal, or the students’ fault, and instead expect educators to create academic environments and activities that students enjoy.

Constructing optimal learning environments not only means that students will be more likely to focus on their academics and achieve, but also treats the social-emotional side of education as an equally important value. This places the onus on educators to resist clinging to control, rushing through academic work as the end all be all, and disregarding students’ interests and emotional needs as secondary to what a prescribed curriculum dictates must be done. It further directs educators to craft active, creative, socially-integrated academic activities that respect students’ time and effort and who they are as individuals. Such an approach benefits and inspires the students, satisfies what parents expect from schools, and also gives teachers a focal point for their instructional choices. Within an occupation in which competing demands on time and versions of educational philosophies can make an already difficult job even more confusing, consistent optimal engagement is the true litmus test. And for mid-adolescents—an age group
that must contend with an array of inherent life-obstacles—optimal emotional engagement must take precedence.


APPENDIX A

LETTER OF CONSENT
I agree that my child may participate in the research project titled **Emotional Engagement and Optimal Learning Experiences for Mid-Adolescents** being conducted by **Brendan McCormick**, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to explore mid-adolescent students’ perspectives regarding their optimal engagement experiences in middle school learning environments.

I understand that if I agree for my child to participate in this study, he or she will be asked to do the following: complete a 4 question narrative survey through Google Forms; participate in a focus group meeting, which will be recorded for accuracy; and finally, select an example of an engaging school assignment or activity and write a reflection on it.

I am aware that my child’s participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study I may contact **Brendan McCormick** at [contact information]. I understand that if I wish to receive further information regarding my child’s rights as a research subject, I may contact **Dr. Elizabeth Wilkins** at [contact information], or the **Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University** at [contact information].

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include allowing middle school students the chance to share their perspectives on their most engaging learning experiences. This information should help educators continue to develop assignments and activities that are interesting, worthwhile, and enjoyable for adolescent students.

I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by allowing students to choose pseudonyms (*fake names*) so that their real names will not be used in the publication. Information from student responses will be used strictly for research and academic purposes. Students will also not be asked information of an intimate or controversial nature, but rather simply on what they find engaging in their life.

I understand that my child’s consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

**I agree that my child may participate in the study**

Parent Signature: ________________________________________________

**I agree that my child may be audio and/or video recorded as part of the focus group process**

Parent Signature: ________________________________________________
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF ASSENT
I agree to participate in the research project titled *Emotional Engagement and Optimal Learning Experiences for Mid-Adolescents* being conducted by **Brendan McCormick**, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to explore mid-adolescent students’ perspectives regarding their optimal engagement experiences in middle school learning environments.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: complete a 4 question narrative survey through Google Forms; participate in a focus group meeting, which will be recorded for accuracy; and finally, select an example of an engaging school assignment or activity and write a reflection on it.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study I may contact **Brendan McCormick** at [815-787-0679](tel:815-787-0679). I understand that if I wish to receive further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact **Dr. Elizabeth Wilkins** at [815-753-8458](tel:815-753-8458), or the **Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University** at [815-753-8588](tel:815-753-8588).

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include allowing middle school students the chance to share their perspectives on their most engaging learning experiences. This information should help educators continue to develop assignments and activities that are interesting, worthwhile, and enjoyable for adolescent students.

I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by allowing students to choose pseudonyms (*fake names*) so that real names will not be used in the publication. Information from student responses will be used strictly for research and academic purposes. Students will also not be asked information of an intimate or controversial nature, but rather simply on what they find enjoyable and worthwhile in their life.

I understand that my participation in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this assent form.

**I agree to participate in the study**

Student Signature: ____________________________________________

**I agree to be audio and/or video recorded as part of the focus group process**

Student Signature: ____________________________________________
McCormick's Research Group- Google Form Student Survey

Please answer each of the following questions with a written response. Write a paragraph for each, or as much as you need to thoroughly answer the question and explain your perspective. There are no right or wrong answers; be honest and fair, and answer why, why not, how, etc. in your explanations. Please do not use the real names of any current or past teachers in your answers.

*Questions 4 and 5 will ask you to refer back to your descriptions from questions 1-3, but related to school activities...

1. Do you ever do something where your concentration is so intense, and your attention so undivided and wrapped up in what you are doing that you sometimes become unaware of things you normally notice (such as people talking, loud noises, time passing, being hungry or tired, etc.)? Answer yes or no, and explain your response thoroughly in complete sentences.

2. Do you ever do something where your skills have become so “second nature” that sometimes everything seems to come to you naturally or effortlessly, and you feel confident you’ll be ready to meet any new challenges? Answer yes or no, and explain your response thoroughly in complete sentences.

3. Do you ever do something where you feel that the activity is worth doing in itself? In other words, if there were no other benefits connected to it—such as money, academic rewards, recognition from others, etc.—you would still do it anyway? Answer yes or no, and explain your response thoroughly in complete sentences.

4. Have you ever experienced any of these feelings (Questions 1, 2, or 3) while at school? Please describe the feeling or feelings you had. Also, please explain where you were, what you were doing, who you were with (if anyone).

5. Have you ever experienced any of these feelings (Questions 1, 2, or 3) while doing school work? Please explain what the assignment, lesson, project, or activity was and which of the 3 feelings you had. What about the assignment or activity caused you to have this feeling?
APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
*Please remember that our goal is to have a conversation about how you feel about school and school work—is it enjoyable, do you want to work hard and do well, etc…

**Please do not use the names of teachers, administrators, or other students…if you let one slip on accident it is not a big deal, but I’ll need to chop it out…

***Also, try to take the questions seriously… We are trying to get to honest answers about the kinds of things you enjoy and want to work hard on, but don’t say that the school should start handing out candy, iPhones, double the lunch period, etc… Unless you really think those would work…😊

1. Please say your name and tell us a little bit about yourself, especially the kinds of things you enjoy doing and want to work hard on. (Remember real names will not be used in the publication…)
2. How do you feel while you are at school?
3. Is there anything about school you enjoy? What/why?
4. Is there anything about school that you do not enjoy? What/why not?
5. Is school worthwhile or important to you? Why/why not?
6. What effect do teachers have on how you feel while you are at school?
7. How does the classroom environment affect how you feel at school? How?
8. How does school compare to other things you do in your life that are enjoyable?
9. Do you feel happy at school? If yes, explain. If no, what would make you happier?
10. Do you ever feel stressed out or anxious at school? Why?
11. Do you ever feel bored at school? Why?
12. Do you ever just not care about your schoolwork? Why?
13. What is the point of school? Why do you come here and what do you hope to get out of it?
14. Are some classes more enjoyable or worthwhile than others? Which ones and why? (Subject areas; not teacher names…)
15. What are the most enjoyable kinds of assignments you are asked to do?
16. In general, what kinds of assignments do you feel inspired to work hard on? Why?
17. Are there any assignments you have done that combine these two—hard work with enjoyment? Explain.
18. Can hard work be enjoyable? Can you think of an example outside of school?
19. How do you feel while you are working on these assignments? How do you feel when they are completed?
20. Are there any assignments you have done where you wanted to work hard but you didn’t enjoy it? What was that like?
21. If you could give advice to your teachers about how to come up with enjoyable assignments and activities, what would it be?
APPENDIX E

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY FORM
McCormick's Research Group: Follow-up Survey

Please answer the following questions. As always, it is up to you what information you feel like volunteering...

Gender (male, female, other):

Race / Ethnicity:

Do you take any special classes at CFMS? (Special Ed, RtI, Challenge, etc.) If yes, please list...

How does school compare to other things you do in your life that are enjoyable?

Have you ever wanted to work hard on an assignment, but you didn't enjoy it? Please explain.

What is the most enjoyable kind of hard work that you can think of? Please explain.

How does your elementary school experience compare with your middle school experience? Please explain.

How do your exploratory classes compare with your core classes? Please explain.

If you could give any advice to teachers and administrators on how to improve your experience with school and school work, what would it be?