

Engagement Strategies That Promote Positive Relationships

Christopher R. Hatch

California State University, Fresno

## Introduction

For students going through the changes of adolescence and the transition of the middle school years, it is important that they maintain a positive relationship with both teachers and peers in their education experience because, students with positive relationships with both peers and teachers will more likely feel that they belong and contribute (Carlisle, 2011, p.21) . According to Wigfield and Eccles (2002), these adolescent years involve many changes such as biological changes due to puberty, changes in relationships with family and peers, as well as social changes due to the transition of elementary to middle school. One way to create connections and maintain positive relationships is through effective engagement strategies provided by the teacher. Through the use of both academic and nonacademic engagement strategies teachers can maintain a positive relationship with students and among students. Newberry (2010) states that the relationships found in education are an important part of learning, affecting all grade levels, and that teachers are given little instruction on how to develop personal relationships with students. This is why engagement strategies that encourage student involvement can create personal connections, and help to bolster positive relationships within an educational context. ~~Teachers have a difficult task in that they must “win their students’ hearts while getting inside their students’ heads” (Wolk, 2003, p.14).~~ Engaging with a student on a personal level, making connections, and building a positive relationship can be difficult with growing class sizes and the use of more prescribed curriculum. One way to counteract this would be engagement strategies that reach the student on both an academic and nonacademic level. The purpose of this study is to examine these types of strategies employed by teachers to make connections with students that create positive relationships within the classroom.

**Comment [J11]:** Consolidate to make more concise.

**Comment [J12]:** Merge statements.

See about making this paragraph a bit more cogent.

The use of the term connection often times is viewed as synonymous with the term relationship. For the purpose of this study, a connection will be defined as a point of understanding that builds upon a relationship. These connections can be made through engagement strategies that are seen as both academic and nonacademic in nature. As there is little evidence of a distinction between the two, the terms will be defined as follows; academic engagement strategies will include the strategies used by teachers that uses the curriculum to engage students and create connections leading to positive relationships, whereas nonacademic engagement strategies will include strategies that go outside of the academic curriculum, but still lead to connections that bolster positive relationships in the classroom.

By using engagement strategies, creating connections with students, and forming positive personal relationships, teachers can better reach students for academic success. Research suggests that teachers who develop positive personal relationships with students will experience fewer behavior problems and perform better academically (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green, and Hanna, 2010). One issue that stands in the way of middle school teachers is classroom management. According to Anderman, Maehr, and Midgley (1999), classroom management is of critical importance in middle school students as they are more likely to experience declines in self-esteem and academic motivation. A key to effective management of the classroom is developing quality relationships in the classroom (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green, and Hanna, 2010). Through engagement strategies that enhance the relationships between student and teacher, teachers can combat these declines of self-esteem and motivation, and create a positive educational experience for all students. Carlisle (2011) noted positive student and teacher relationships are essential to a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Carlisle (2011) also states

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that a healthy student and teacher relationship involves the perception of high levels of support given to middle school students by teachers within the educational environment.

Another point of view on the relationships between students and teachers can be found from the student's perspective. According to Steinberg and McCray (2012), students desire caring teachers, and that middle school learning can be enhanced by teachers showing that they care for their students as individuals. Making connections on a personal level and building positive relationships coincides with what the students in the classroom seek from their teachers. It can be said that if students are getting what they want out of the relationship, then they will perform when called upon. With that said, it is important to make note of what Ding and Hall (2007) alluded to, that the levels of achievement may be determined by the relationships students have with their teachers. [For each paragraph a concluding paragraph to indicate implications or take home message.](#)

This literature review will look at the middle school student. In this review middle school will be defined by grades six through eight. The middle school student will be profiled from a developmental perspective that will include social, psychological, and academic development. The literature will show that engagement strategies that focus on both academics and nonacademics can lead to connections and positive relationships between student and teacher, as well as among student peers. The literature will also show that these positive relationships can lead to positive results personally, as well as academically. The review will explore strategies used to engage students, what their purpose is, and what the possible outcomes can be. The research will show the importance of a positive relationship between student and [teacher](#), the strategies used to accomplish this, and the results that can follow.

**Comment [J15]:** Keep editing to keep message clear & cogent.

### Middle School Students

Middle school students are at a critical time in their lives and very different than other student populations, as Steinberg and McCray (2012) point out,

Adolescence is a critical developmental period, as the minds and bodies of children are transformed into those of adults. These students are beginning to become more and more responsible for their own learning as they leave elementary school and transition into high school. Adolescents are striving toward independence during a time in their lives when physiological and psychological changes are occurring rapidly. (p. 2)

Comment [J16]: Paraphrase.

Through these changes they may also be navigating the diversity of culture, especially seen in California where all students in the state of California make up a rather diverse group. Monterey County may show even stronger evidence in cultural and socio-economic diversity among its students. According to Kidsdata.org (2013) and estimates from U.S. Census Bureau (2012), California's total population was over 38 million of which 1.5 million falls into the middle school range. Monterey County included 17,000 students ages 11-13, with 38% of these students being English learners (EL's), second only to Imperial County in the entire state. Nearly 70% of all students in Monterey County are eligible for free or reduced lunch. These statistics show the diversity in culture and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students at the middle school level, especially of those in California.

On top of this diversity, middle school students are unique in that they are dealing with a drastic increase in physical and cognitive changes. According to Susman and Rogel (2004), the biological changes that early adolescent students go through are dramatic. Wigfield, Lutz, and

Wagner (2005) go on to state that these dramatic changes can significantly impact developmental outcomes such as the development of self-concept, and achievement in both motivation and academics. Research has shown that there are significant changes to the brain during the adolescent years and it shows these changes in the brain include cognition, behavior, and decision making (Keating, 2004). Hatter (1999) points out that identity formation occurs during adolescence, and that this identity is formed through such activities and relationships as school achievement, social relationships, and the developing of possible career interests. The changes endured by adolescent students, coupled with the diversity of their educational surroundings, leads to difficult navigation of a path to success with issues arising both behaviorally and academically in the classroom. As these students go through so many changes, including physical and cognitive, it becomes increasingly clear that a positive relationship with a teacher can help them navigate through these changes.

~~Because of these changes,~~ Collins and Laursen (2004) state that, relations with teachers can become a very important source of support to many early adolescents. Drolet and Arcand (2013) believe that the connection resulting from listening to and being there for developing adolescents in everyday activities, and understanding their issues presents an opportunity for better becoming credible, trusting, and legitimate to youth. As a teacher these are qualities that become important to a positive relationship.

The middle school student is dealing with transitions from one school to another, new teachers instead of one all day long, rapid change in physical and cognitive development, as well as trying to find their place socially. Through these changes, studies show that adolescent motivation and interest in academics and academic achievement declines rapidly in the middle school years (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green, and Hanna, 2010). Because of these changes and issues of

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Keep paragraphs to around 5 statements, no less than 4.

Be sure to begin w/ a topic statement

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decline in motivation and interest brought by physical and emotional changes, middle school students hold unique challenges to be met by teachers. Classroom management is a challenge that can become critically important during middle school as students during these years experience a drop in academic motivation and self-esteem (Marzano, 2003). These drops in motivation and self-esteem are unique to middle school teachers as they come with common development.

According to Beaty-O’Farrall et.al (2010), teaching middle school students is unique in its demands for unconventional thinking. ~~Teachers must be willing to bend the rules to go beyond convention.~~

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Insert concluding paragraph to wrap up section to the reader. It should also transition to the next section of paper.

### Engagement Strategies

Insert a topic statement. Engagement strategies, must first be defined by engagement or the act of being engaged. Through the help of Merriam-Webster (2013), two definitions work. First, engaged is being involved in an activity. Second, it also means being greatly interested, or committed. Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) state that student engagement is typically defined as commitment or involvement, but that this definition can distract from important issues of achievement. According to Lee and Shute (2010), student engagement emphasizes the behavioral and affective aspects of student learning. Fredericks et al. (2004) focused on the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional as the defining aspects of student engagement. We can’t solely define student engagement as paying attention or being interested in the content of the curriculum being presented. That being said, and based on the above definitions, engagement

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strategies are those strategies used by teachers to involve students behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally.

**Comment [J110]:** Keep developing to create coherent opening paragraph to section.

Student engagement can be conceptualized by willingness to participate in class, lack of negative behavioral incidents, completion of assigned work, and academic achievement on summative and formative assessments. Engagement strategies are those strategies used by teachers to get and keep students actively engaged in the class. As earlier stated, these can be categorized in both academic and nonacademic terms.

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Academic engagement strategies revolve around the use of the academic curriculum and strategies that could be used to enhance or build upon that curriculum (citations). These strategies may be a specific labeled strategy such as think-pair-share in which a teacher asks students to discuss the current topic with another student and then share out with the class. Another example of this could be using student interests to generate writing prompts. These strategies incorporate ways to engage students by allowing them to be social and identify with topics which coincide with their developmental state of wanting autonomy and seeking identity. Even further, Steinberg and McCray (2012) point out that that a teacher can keep middle school students engaged in their education by including them in decision making processes. Allowing adolescent students to explore these concepts within the context of the curriculum can create positive student-teacher relationships and foster positive relations among peers.

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Nonacademic engagement strategies are making connections with students beyond the academic realms. These types of connections can also bolster the student-teacher relationship and enhance the classroom dynamic. An example of these would be to use journal topics to gain a better understanding of student interest. Other examples would be to use student collaboration

**Comment [J113]:** Good use of examples & be sure to use throughout to ensure clarity of message.

on classroom decisions, attending student extracurricular activities, and being a part of their school day outside of classroom setting. Although these strategies may not be rooted in the curriculum, they can lend themselves to positive connections, and lead to a greater positive relationship between student and teacher. Students who develop positive relationships with school personnel and who are connected to school feel a sense of belonging within the school community (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001).

Engagement strategies, whether they are academic, or nonacademic in nature can help, as Lee and Shute (2004) agree that there are a number of studies that show how academic achievement is strongly correlated to student engagement. Having engaged students, or students with vested interest in the subject matter and the learning outcomes, behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally, is important to the success of these students academically.

**Comment [J114]:** Review research of strategies on student learning outcomes. Want to show what info we have on these strategies to promote student learning

#### Positive Student Teacher Relationship: Making the Connection

~~The student teacher relationship dates back to some of our oldest literature.~~ Need topic statement Even today, according to Ding and Hall (2007), a student's level of achievement may be determined by the relationships they have with their teachers. It is this human connection that is to be explored in determining better productivity, success, and overall engagement. In recent studies, according to Steinberg and McCray (2012), research is showing that students have a pretty clear perception of their own learning and learning environment. Students know what qualities that they want from their teachers.

Certo, Cauley, and Chafin (2003) state that students want personal relationships with their teachers, they want teachers that are caring, that listen, were concerned about their academics, and were aware of their lives outside of the classroom and school. Carlisle (2011)

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states that adolescence includes rapid development and change, and as they develop, their relationships with others, including teachers, are a key component of this development. Because the middle school years are filled with transition and change, teachers have an opportunity to create positive relationships that help guide these students through this time.

There are many ways to create positive relationships with students and getting them to feel connected to their class and the curriculum. Steinberg and McCray (2012) concluded through their study that teachers can foster these connections if they, “Can show that they care about students as individuals; structure opportunities for students to interact with them and each other around real-world problems; and incorporate technology into learning in ways adolescents already use it.” A teacher can show that they care through a relationship building approach, by focusing on developing the whole person, and according to Beaty-O’Farrall et.al (2010), this approach helps to develop the whole person and is more likely to help a student develop positive, socially appropriate behaviors. The same article goes on to state that this relationship building approach can be done by taking personal interest in students’ lives, establishing clear classroom learning goals, and modeling positive behaviors.

**Comment [J116]:** Paraphrase & keep in own words. This paragraph should focus on identifying & defining strategies to create positive relationships.

Newberry (2010), as well as Autman, Williams-Johnson, and Schutz (2009) agree that the kind of relationship as well as the quality of the relationship formed between teacher and student are key to both successful teaching and learning. Consequently Juvonen (2007) points out, when students lack a bond or do not get along with a teacher, students are presumed to disengage themselves from school related activities and the institution.

**Comment [J117]:** Build paragraph a bit more.

Newberry (2010) and Reeve (2006), believe that the more supportive a relationship the teachers have with students, the more comfortable and engaged students are going to be in an

academic setting. Reeve (2006) would define a positive student teacher relationship, one that relies on a caring relationship and leads to positive motivation and engagement, to consist of four parts; 1. Attunement, or sensitivity to student's feelings, 2. Relatedness, or how well students relate to a teacher, 3. Supportiveness, or the teacher's ability to accept students as they are and support them in their capacity for self-direction, 4. Gentle Discipline, or the ability to guide and explain why ones thinking or behaving is socially seen as wrong.

**Comment [J118]:** Define a bit more & show how related to positive environment.

The literature all points to the idea that in order to create a positive connection with students teachers must incorporate the interests of students, give students a say and allow for student input in decision making, have clear learning goals and behavior expectations, and show that you care by taking personal interest in their lives and the challenges that they face (Beatty-O'Farrall et.al, 2010, Certo, Cauley, and Chafin, 2003). One should see that teachers are to attempt to understand the student as an individual, find a way to relate to them, be supportive, and discipline by explaining, Reeve (2006).

#### Purpose of the Study of Engagement Strategies

According to Juvonen (2007) and Brough (1995), Junior highs (middle schools) ~~were~~ seek to...created to encourage students to continue their education beyond primary grades, but they have struggled to engage students. Juvonen (2007) goes on to say that rather than help with the transition into secondary school, intermediate schools may have contributed to the disengagement and alienation of youth, specifically in marginalized populations. Juvonen discusses middle school reform in this article and states that as far back as the 1990's it was presumed that a lack of connections with peers and teachers can partially account for disengagement and a decline in interest of school work after the transition to middle school

(Juvonen, 2007, Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Rueman, and Flanagan, 1993). Newberry (2010) states that there are differences in how teachers approach the relationships in the classroom, and that how these differences occur is not well known, even though it has been studied, across grade levels and cultures, for over thirty years. Although engagement became a source of success for middle school students, more research was needed on the relationships between student and teacher, as well as how that relationship would lead to engagement and ultimately to academic success.

The focus has turned to student teacher relationship and student engagement in the past decade. There has been research on positive relationships and their effect on student achievement, self-efficacy, and motivation (Beatty-O'Ferrall, Green, and Hanna, 2010, Certo, Cauley, and Chafin, 2003 Anderman, Maehr, and Midgley, 1999). There have been studies that look at specific strategies to increase engagement such as Steinberg and McCray's (2012) look at students understanding of what they need of a teacher, following what students perceive to need from a teacher. We also could look at Elliott-Johns, Booth, Rowsell, Puig, and Paterson's (2012) emphasis on student voice, and opportunities to incorporate it into the curriculum. Even Gutzmer and Wilder (2012) and their poetry unit for middle school that uses student voices to guide instruction. This research shows that student buy-in is important for instruction and using student voice is an engagement strategy gaining involvement and vested interest by students.

Although there has been recent research that shows the importance of a positive relationship, and there has also been research on some ways to provide this positive relationship, there is a lack of research on what I defined as nonacademic engagement strategies, or ways to build a positive relationship outside of the classroom. As Wolk (2003) put it, teachers must win the hearts of students. How does this happen in a standardized academic environment? Are

**Comment [JI19]:** Keep editing to promote flow. You begin w/ purpose of middle school & report important info on ways in which practices/policies may disenfranchise youth. This is important & so keep developing this so to build a case for your work to promote a positive learning environment w/in middle school settings.

there ways to incorporate engagement strategies into the daily routine of a middle school classroom? The research so far has been most easily integrated into a Language Arts classroom, so how do you use student centered teaching in less language based classes such as mathematics and science?

Through this study we will learn about common practice engagement strategies for middle school teachers that create a positive relationship with students. The study will differentiate engagement strategies as ones based on academics and curriculum, as well as strategies based on nonacademic situations such as being outside of the classroom. Creating a positive relationship can happen both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. Making a connection with a student can happen through academics or nonacademic means. This study will compile best practices for middle school teachers. It will put together engagement strategies that lead to positive relationships which, according to the literature, will ultimately lead to academic achievement and help middle school students through the many transitions of adolescence. It is important to continue to study the teacher student interaction and strategies to achieve a more positive relationship because as Reeve (2006) puts it;

~~When teacher student interactions go well, teachers function both as a guide to structure students learning opportunities as well as a support system to nurture student's interest and enable students to internalize new values, develop important skills and develop social responsibility. (225-226)~~

**Comment [J120]:** What study – are you talking about your work here?

**Comment [J121]:** Keep developing to make clear case for what you want to examine, why important, & how it will promote a better learning environment in your classroom/school.

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Comment [J122]: Good set of articles & so check APA formatting.

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