AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

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Abstract

Student engagement in learning at the middle school level is a key indicator of academic success in high school (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2012). Alternatively, disengagement from learning at this level can result in behavioral and academic challenges which can ultimately lead to the decision to drop out from high school (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004). This qualitative study was conducted to explore how highly engaged middle school students understand and experience engagement in learning. The study also sought to understand how school structures and strategies support or hinder engagement in learning. The study considered the experiences of six highly engaged middle school students. Their experiences were considered through the lenses of engagement theory and stage-environment fit theory. This study was conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis that focused on the lived experiences of the participants with student engagement in learning at the middle level. Student participants indicated that positive relationships in the learning environment, varied instructional strategies, student-initiated study strategies, perseverance, and academic success support engagement in learning at the middle level.

*Keywords:* student engagement, middle school, learning environment, study strategies, perseverance
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how the middle school student perceives and experiences engagement in learning. This study considers both the middle school learner, who faces a multitude of challenges that come with the onset of adolescence, and the unique characteristics of the middle school learning environment. Cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement are considered in this study (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

Engagement in learning is crucial at the middle school level for later academic success (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; Orthner et al., 2012). Many students struggle with sustaining engagement in learning as they transition from the elementary school to the middle level (San Antonio, 2004; Wang & Dishion, 2012). The onset of adolescence can add further challenge, which explains why it is common for engagement in learning to decline during the middle school years (Eccles et al., 1993; Wang & Dishion, 2012). Students may enter early middle school years with optimism and enthusiasm, but this wanes as academic routines and expectations become more rigid. Typically, a student becomes disengaged by the time he or she enters ninth grade, not after (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Orthner et al., 2012). When coupled with a myriad other pressures, such as family responsibilities, prior retentions, peer influences, and simply being an adolescent in the midst of great change, the challenge to engage in learning increases drastically (Fall & Roberts, 2012).
Although the school is not solely responsible for the academic failure or success of students, it is also clear that school can be one of the most positive influences on a student’s life (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Eccles, 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wang & Dishion, 2012). School determines the learning environment. In particular, the teacher’s role includes much more than simply delivering the curriculum; the teacher also regulates the classroom environment that will ultimately support or challenge a student’s ability to effectively engage in learning. (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). If students feel that they are safe, they are willing to take more risks. If students’ contrasting needs for both socialization and autonomy are taken into consideration, then academic engagement is more likely (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wormald, 2012).

When academic achievement is a priority for a school, academic achievement will occur (Yecke & Finn, 2005). Middle school aged students are capable of the same levels of academic achievement that students younger and older than they are reaching; this negates the theory of plateau learning, which claims that the brain of a 12-14 year old reaches a learning plateau and that, in fact, trying to force learning during this time could be detrimental to a child’s brain (Yecke & Finn, 2005). Engaged middle school students have higher attendance and achievement levels (Klem & Connell, 2004). Academic success at the high school level is directly linked to academic achievement in middle school, which in turn is related to a low probability of dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007; Eccles, 1999; Orthner et al., 2012).

**Significance of the Problem**

Disengagement from learning can display itself in a number of ways, from apathy to behavioral challenges (Greene, 2008). By ninth grade, approximately 50% of students
have become disengaged from school (Klem & Connell, 2004). Disengagement from school often leads to the decision to not successfully complete high school and earn a diploma (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004). Approximately 8.1%, or 3,000,000 students are considered high school dropouts each year. (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011).

Beyond the significance of the high school diploma, dropping out of school most often correlates with a poor adjustment into society (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009); Half of the incarcerated population is made up of high school dropouts (Alexander et al., 1997). High school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, and those who find work make an average annual income of $25,000. This compares to a high school graduate’s average annual income of $43,000 (Chapman et al., 2011). In contrast, increased student engagement lessens the risk of poor health, poverty, and the need for public assistance and increases the likelihood of success in college and career (Fredricks et al., 2004; Orthner et al., 2012). For these reasons, it is crucial to provide a middle school environment that is both developmentally appropriate and that also stimulates engagement in learning, so that a successful transition into high school can occur (Eccles et al., 1993).

**Position Statement**

I have worked in public schools for the past fourteen years. I spent two years in a rural Vermont K-12 school as a middle school paraprofessional and eleven years in a rural New Hampshire school district where I primarily taught English to students in grades seven, eight, and nine. Last year, I moved into an administrative level curriculum leadership position in a middle school in a semi-rural New Hampshire city. My primary
responsibilities include analyzing data and providing ongoing support and professional development that focus on the effective development and implementation of engaging curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment tools.

I have been interested in middle level education since my initial experience as a paraprofessional; I recognized the unique energy and enthusiasm that middle-school aged children possess and became interested in its potential. For more than a decade, I have observed middle school aged children responding to middle school learning experiences on a broad continuum – sometimes highly engaged and at other times drastically disengaged. In light of these experiences, and acknowledging that challenges both inside and outside of the academic day exist, I am compelled to provide an opportunity for the voice of engaged students to be heard. Assuming that student voice and experience are valuable sources of information, this study can positively benefit research in middle level education.

**Research Goals and Questions**

My goal is to understand an engaged middle school student’s perception of engagement in learning and its connection with learning experiences that take place in the middle school classroom. There is a connection between student engagement in learning and academic success (Finn, 1997; Furrer, 2003; Herman, 2000; Wormald, 2012).

In order to understand engagement from this perspective and in this specific context, the following questions will be considered:

- How do middle school students who identify themselves as engaged in learning understand and experience engagement?
- What classroom and school structures and strategies do middle school students identify as supporting or hindering engagement?
Because the questions address a unique population in a specific setting, it requires an in depth study of the relationship between the student and the learning environment.

Engagement theory and stage environment fit theory will provide the framework for this study. Through the lens of engagement theory, the roles of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in learning are considered (Fredricks, 2011). Then, stage-environment fit theory provides a lens to examine the connection between the environment and student engagement in learning (Eccles et al., 1993). Together they provide the ideal framework from which to consider these research questions.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Engagement Theory**

Csikszentmihalyi (1986) states that engagement produces growth through a process where the individual gives attention in active response to the environment. Engagement in learning shows itself as behaviors and tasks necessary for learning, such as attending school, following directions and completing assignments. Engagement theory has become pivotal for educators as a way to understand how to improve academic outcomes for struggling students. A decrease in motivation at school has also increased interest in understanding engagement in learning (Handbook of research on student engagement, 2012). Engagement in learning is the greatest force against alienation and is a malleable quality (Fredricks et al., 2004). Based on this context, and for the purposes of this study, engagement in learning is broken down into three categories: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, which often overlap (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Furthermore, engagement occurs on a continuum, from disengaged to highly engaged (Lohmann, 2009; Wormald, 2012). Behavioral engagement is measured by the ability to follow classroom rules with the absence of disruptive behaviors, contributing
positively to classroom discussions and participating positively in school activities outside of the classroom setting, such as extracurricular activities; emotional engagement refers to feelings of interest, happiness, sadness, anxiety and boredom that students experience in relationship to school work, teachers, peers, and the school itself; cognitive engagement is measured by a student’s desire to succeed in school, which is often evident through strategic behavior and the desire to be challenged (Fredricks et al., 2004). While Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) suggest that these three areas of engagement are of equal importance, Harris (2011) asserts that there is a hierarchical relationship between these three aspects of engagement; first, behavioral engagement must occur. Then, emotional engagement will follow. Finally, cognitive development can be achieved.

Fredricks (2011) suggests four elements that influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. First, teachers who are fair, caring and supportive promote student engagement in learning. This can play out in many ways, including appropriately differentiated instruction, strong communication, and a teacher’s ability to acknowledge students as unique individuals. Second, peers provide a great positive influence on one another through positive role modeling, and collaboration in group learning experiences. Third, adequate structure in the learning environment, including clear rules and expectations and smooth transitions, support engagement in learning. Finally, learning tasks that are age appropriate, interesting, and appropriately challenging support an ideal engaging learning environment. Theoretically, when these positive influences are present, students engage in learning. The more consistent and constant these influences, the more likely a student is to engage in the learning process (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).
While these elements encourage and support engagement in learning, there is also evidence that humans are naturally wired to be engaged and curious; when a human has become disengaged, it is because something has happened to reverse this. (Pink, 2009). Adolescence is a time marked by change and transition; changes in environment, including relationships, pose interesting challenges to the adolescent learner (Eccles, 1999). For this reason, a second theoretical lens, stage-environment fit theory, provides an essential structure to consider the unique challenges of this particular age.

**Stage-Environment Fit Theory**

Engagement is challenging during adolescence because of rapid behavioral, emotional, and cognitive changes (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Perlstein, 2003). Stage-environment fit theory considers the impact of these changes on a student’s learning environment and how this impacts the ability to engage in learning (Eccles et al., 1993). The reality is that supports and constructs that once sufficed are no longer adequate; the environment must support the child’s changing needs with minimal conflict (Eccles 1999). Building on the elements that arise in engagement theory, stage-environment fit theory suggests that there is a distinct relationship between a person and his or her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Eccles et al., 1993; Hunt, 1975). The environment consists of many elements, including place, time, physical features, activity and participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Behavior, person and environment are inextricably woven together, and their relationships to one another must be considered (Hunt, 1975). Behavior is dependent on the person and the environment. Hunt describes four key characteristics of the behavior - person - environment (B-P-E) paradigm. The three components must be interactive, the developmental level of the person must be
taken into account, both the effect of the environment on the person and the effect of the
person on the environment must be considered, and there are practical implications of
how these elements interact (Hunt, 1975).

Furthermore, Hunt states, “not only do students exert an effect on their
educational environment, but they are also becoming increasingly responsible for
selecting which one of a variety of educational environments they will experience” (Hunt
1975, p. 224). In other words, as the individual develops a sense of autonomy, they begin
to exercise choice. This shift in responsibility for choosing the educational environment
suggests that the relationship between behavior, person, and environment is of great
importance, and a harmonious relationship between the three is a priority to the
individual. This does not necessarily imply that students at all developmental levels are
prepared to make the most appropriate choices for themselves; Hunt found that a more
cognitively developed person is more likely to successfully adapt to change (Hunt, 1975).

While Hunt (1975) considers the relationship between individual and
environment from the perspective of the individual, Bronfenbrenner (1979) posits that the
environment itself plays a crucial role in a person’s ability to grow. Environments that
support complex, reciprocal relationships yield greater growth. A reciprocal relationship
happens whenever one person pays attention to or participates with another individual in
the setting. As environments shift, so do the roles that people play. Notably, it is the
perception, not the objective view of an environment that matters (Bronfenbrenner,
1979).

Engagement and stage-environment fit theories work together in considering
engagement in learning during a time marked by change. As environments shift, so do the
roles that people play, and expectations for behavior change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A thorough examination of both the learning environment and the learner provide an essential foundation for further study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is designed to provide a deeper understanding of both the middle school learner and the environment in which the middle school learner is situated. It begins with a thorough study of the American middle school. Next, a review of the literature on the learning environment focuses on school culture, teacher-student relationships and peer-peer relationships. Finally, this chapter concludes with a focus on the unique characteristics of the young adolescent learner.

The American Middle School Movement

Conflicting views regarding the best educational structure for the young adolescent have existed since the late 1800’s (Groden, 1976; Koos, 1920). In the 1960’s, the reorganization of the secondary school generated a stronger focus on the middle grades; the preferred high school program consisted of a four year program, which prompted conversations about the unique educational needs of the young adolescent versus the adolescent (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Groden, 1976). By the 1980’s, a call to look at the unique needs of the young adolescent learner shifted the focus from school and grade organization to providing a comprehensive age appropriate education for young adolescent learners; this was inspired by Dr. William Alexander, an educator who specialized in curriculum development (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Alexander best described the fundamental differences of the middle school model from the traditional junior high structure by articulating the importance of providing an education that keeps in mind the various areas of development that the young adolescent is experiencing: physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional development (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Alexander
insisted that all areas of development are woven together, and therefore, the whole child must be considered when developing and implementing curriculum and instruction. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) states that these areas of development “…are inexorably intertwined, making the achievement of academic success highly dependent upon the other developmental needs being met” (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 5).

The middle school movement was created in order to support the unique needs of the young adolescent learner. Specifically, it was born out of a desire to connect students with teachers in a way that would prevent feelings of alienation while also providing students with the opportunity to actively engage in their learning community (Lounsbury, 2000). Additionally, the middle school movement held a belief that middle schools should support students’ decision making processes, both through curriculum and through relationships with caring adults, as they are experiencing tremendous growth while shifting influence from parents and families to peers; best practices in middle level education take into account the unique behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of the young adolescent. (This We Believe 2010).

**Best Practices in Middle Level Education**

Best practices in middle level education find their roots in the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1915), who noted the importance of engaging students in learning through sound curricular and instructional practices. He stated that education should be facilitated in such a way that it draws out the latent curiosities of our students. Dewey suggested that passivity in learning forces the learner to rely on the teacher’s mind and denies the opportunity for authentic learning. Middle level education theory
builds upon this idea; the primary focus of middle level education should be to support the intellectual development of the early adolescent. This involves supporting students in problem solving, communication skills, and attainment of knowledge and skills that can provide an essential foundation for future academic growth (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This also requires that teachers consider the young adolescent as central to the learning process. By inviting students to participate in genuine teaching and learning experiences, the school nurtures positive student attitudes about learning and school (Lounsbury, 1991).

Best practices in middle level education fall under the categories of curriculum, instruction, assessment; leadership, and organization; as well as culture and community. Characteristics are based on the belief that middle level students learn at different paces, all students need guidance and structure from trusted adults, community and family involvement in education is essential, and students require a comprehensive education that can be accessed through multiple learning and teaching approaches (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

Best practices in middle level education include a strong focus on academic achievement while recognizing the unique characteristics of the young adolescent learner; by taking into consideration a number of key elements, educators are better equipped to help students achieve rigorous and relevant academic goals (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Best practice in education as a whole consists of instructional approaches that correlate with high academic performance. At the middle level, these approaches can include inquiry based learning, differentiated instruction, opportunities for collaborative work, and curriculum that is relevant to the student (Oliveira et al., 2013). Additional middle
level best practices include staffing middle schools with educators who are specifically trained to work with young adolescents; supporting all facets of student development, including health and ethics education; and involving families and the community in the education of the young adolescent (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These recommendations ensure both a relevant and rigorous curriculum for each student and that the best instructional strategies are employed to help students to access the curriculum.

Young adolescence is marked by rapid growth (Eccles et al., 1993). The young adolescent is developing new and greater capacities for thinking and learning (Hunt, 1975). This means that middle grades students have a greater capacity to carry out their own learning and make decisions about how they interact with their learning environment (Hunt, 1975). Because cognitive growth is gradual and sporadic, most young adolescents still highly benefit from concrete, experiential learning experiences (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Given the fact that middle school students are developing and growing on varying timelines, it is meaningless and counterproductive to expect that all students will learn the same material at the same rate and on the same timeline (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). This is a crucial element of effective middle school learning; AMLE recommends that all middle level students have access to an education that is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

Commonalities among high performing middle schools include an emphasis on collaboration among staff, (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010) both formal and informal; evidence-based decision making; and a shared vision that focuses on high expectations for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status (Angelis & Wilcox,
High performing middle schools use data to set measurable goals for all students, monitor progress, and align curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all learners (Zehr, 2010). Most notably, high performing middle schools with a large population of students who live in poverty find these common elements present in their practices (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; Zehr, 2010). When engagement wanes, high performing middle schools will approach the student with multiple efforts to support the student (Oliveira et al., 2013). These efforts can include differentiating instruction, creating relevant and authentic learning tasks, providing opportunities for collaborative and hands-on work, and promoting positive relationships in the learning environment (Oliveira et al., 2013).

**Learning Environment in Middle Schools**

The learning environment plays a pivotal role in academic achievement; the most essential elements of the school environment include school culture and interpersonal relationships between the student and the teacher and among peers (Marks, 2000; McCollum & Yoder, 2011). Stage-environment fit theory suggests that students learn best when the learning environment is developmentally appropriate (Eccles et al., 1993). Part of the learning environment is the people who make up the learning community; it is through interactions with people in their environment that children learn (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The transition in relationships between the elementary and middle levels is profound; not only do students interact with a greater number of teachers in the middle school day, but also students are often combined with students transitioning from other elementary schools, creating a distinct new learning environment (Knowles & Brown, 2000).
School Culture

From the changes in education during the industrial revolution to the present time, diversity in the school population has continued to grow, particularly in terms of race, socio-economic status, and academic ability (Mahar, 2001). This has a profound effect on school culture because learning is a social act (Wolk, 2003). Social, cultural and political influences impact classroom relationships, curricular decisions, and pedagogical approaches, all of which contribute to the overall school culture (Nieto, 1999). Furthermore, learning is an active process that builds on previous experience. It is influenced by both culture and the context in which it occurs (Nieto, 1999). Learning is a process, deeply influenced by the experiences and opportunities that a student brings to the classroom and also influenced by the experiences that are provided for the student at school (Mahar, 2001). The classroom teacher takes on the role of facilitating learning for a diverse group of learners. This includes the challenging task of understanding codes of power that influence how individuals relate to one another, both inside and outside of the school day (Mahar, 2001; Nieto, 1999).

Schools have the ability to create a climate and develop a culture that supports positive learning for all students and discourages negative behaviors (Wang & Dishion, 2012). Schools with the most positive school culture place academic performance above all other values, while average schools place orderliness and teamwork before academic performance (Gaziel, 1997; Yecke & Finn, 2005). In addition to high expectations for academic performance, other contributors to a positive school culture include high expectations for behavior, engaging curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on
personalized learning opportunities, and professional learning opportunities for staff members to engage in collaborative efforts (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The teaming model of teaching is a key element of the middle school movement that is intended to promote positive school culture (Jackson & Davis, 2000). In the teaming model, a group of students has common teachers. In theory, teams create more personalized and intimate learning environments for students. In large schools, teams serve as smaller schools that provide students with greater opportunities to connect positively with an adult (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010). In fact, Keifer and Ellerbrock (2010) suggest that teaming “…can help shape students’ peer relationships and their perceptions of the peer world by reinforcing and modeling positive behaviors and character traits while minimizing less favorable ones” (p. 52). Because teams of students spend intensive time together, they can authentically develop team pride, mutual respect, and responsibility to their learning community. This is crucial during a developmental stage that requires connectedness and belonging in order to be most successful (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010). Teams also provide teachers with greater flexibility in scheduling. This provides more potential for teachers to be able to individualize learning and modify experiences for the students in their classrooms. Additionally, the teaming model includes room for common planning time. This can support greater communication among a student’s teachers which, in turn, can promote a more consistent learning environment for the student (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010).

Although teaming is intended to support the middle school learner, this structure does present a striking change for the new middle school student. While a student may have previously spent the majority of the day in a self-contained classroom, he or she
may now experience a number of classroom transitions throughout the day (Wentzel, 1997). This challenge is worth considering in light of the young adolescent’s need for deep, consistent relationships with adults in the learning environment (Wang & Dishion, 2012).

Finally, teachers hold a great deal of control over the school culture; attitudes about teaching the young adolescent directly impact the culture of the school (Esquith, 2014; Wormeli, 2001). Teachers feel a greater sense of responsibility to contribute positively to school morale when their superiors demonstrate commitment to education (Esquith, 2014). A strong sense of collegiality, a shared sense of purpose, and the ability to exercise creativity contribute to high teacher morale. (Noddings, 2014). The teacher plays a pivotal role in creating and sustaining a positive learning environment (Esquith, 2014; Hester, Gable, & Lee Manning, 2003; Wormeli, 2001).

**The Relationship between the Student and the Teacher**

The successful middle level teacher is able to demonstrate care and concern about the young adolescent while simultaneously maintaining a sense of humor, great flexibility, and a passion for teaching and learning in a student centered format (Knowles & Brown, 2000). Students who think that teachers care about them are more engaged in school (Klem & Connell, 2004; Wang & Dishion, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wentzel, 1997). Teachers exhibit caring behavior by supporting students academically, behaviorally, and socially; they model caring behavior for students to observe and replicate, they engage students in meaningful conversation, and they set high academic and behavioral expectations for each student. (Noddings, 1992; Wang & Dishion, 2012). Additional positive teacher attributes include the ability to remain calm and suspend negative
reactions as well as impulses during a difficult situation and learning to understand the background from which a student comes. These teacher attitudes can have a profound impact on the role that education plays in a child’s life, both in daily ways and in the larger context of his or her life. (Beaty-O’Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010). Additionally, students have greater success in the classroom when they can identify similarities and connections between and with the teacher (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012).

Often, a student will feel a lack of connection with his or her teacher at the middle level – a striking contrast from the elementary school experience (San Antonio, 2004). This perception may be based more on the difference in daily structure between the two levels than anything else. For example, an elementary school student may feel a closer connection to the teacher in a self-contained classroom than among a team of teachers (Wentzel, 1997). The middle school student will often define a teacher as caring by describing caring qualities that are similar to that of a parent-child relationship (Wentzel, 1997). Qualities include providing opportunities for both autonomous decision making and democratic interactions, expectations that take into account the unique qualities of the individual student, exhibiting care and concern about the student’s work, and providing useful feedback (Wentzel, 1997). Above all, an effective middle level educator will show great enthusiasm about teaching and learning at the middle level (Wormeli, 2001).

Teachers who facilitate democratic classrooms experience more success with engagement in learning. The democratic classroom promotes choice, authentic learning, critical inquiry, and relevant curriculum. This, in turn, supports positive teacher-student relationships which ultimately results in more engaged and meaningful learning (Strong,
Silver, & Perini, 2001; Wolk, 2003). Additionally, teachers who foster a sense of belonging, and teachers who understand and empathize with the challenges of being a young adolescent learner experience a more successful classroom culture (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010; Powell, 2011).

Students purport that teachers are committed to the success of students when they thoughtfully develop and implement rigorous and relevant curriculum (Cunningham, 2006). Wolk (2003) states that, “These elements – teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and how and what we teach – are as interwoven and interdependent as a double-helix strand of DNA. Together, they create caring classrooms with a shared sense of intellectual purpose” (p.15). These elements are malleable; for example, both the student and the teacher can play an active role in strengthening a weak teacher-student relationship which, in turn, can result in greater student outcomes (Gehlbach et al., 2012).

**Peer to Peer Relationships**

Perhaps the most striking transition for early adolescents occurs at the cognitive level; it is during this time that children begin to think more abstractly, consider hypothetical situations, and reflect. It is also during this time that students develop more self-awareness regarding strengths and weaknesses (Eccles, 1999). At the same time, relationships with family and peers change as early adolescents strive for independence (Eccles, 1999; Knowles & Brown, 2000). While early adolescents turn to peers for advice on fashion, music, and other choices of expression, they still most often rely heavily on parent opinion when it comes to bigger life issues. A young adolescent’s peer group more
often reinforces behavior choices that the individual is independently choosing to make (Eccles, 1999; Galván, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011).

Nevertheless, there is evidence that young adolescents are most attracted to those behaviors that will benefit their social status. Socially acceptable behaviors shift dramatically from elementary to middle school (Galván et al., 2011). At the elementary level, compliance and engagement is highly valued by students, and in middle school, noncompliant and disengaged behavior is often perceived as beneficial to the student’s social status. In fact, students who are perceived as “slackers” during seventh and eighth grade often have a higher social standing among their peer group. This matches a young adolescent’s growing independence from parents and other authoritative adults. (Galván et al., 2011).

Because peer relationships play such a crucial role in supporting or deterring behaviors during this particular stage, it is especially important to consider the ways in which the structure of the middle school environment can promote positive interactions. At their best, peers support and care for one another. For example, students are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities when they are supported by their peers to do so (Wang & Eccles, 2012). At their worst, they perpetuate negative characteristics, such as being insincere with one another or judging others based on appearance or athletic ability (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010; Wang & Dishion, 2012). From grade six to grade eight, a young adolescent’s perception of a successful peer shifts from one who is sincere and responsible to one who is dominant and who has an attractive appearance (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010). Consistent, positive relationships with adults can minimize negative peer influences (Wang & Dishion, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012).
The Unique Characteristics of the Young Adolescent Learner

Early adolescence parallels Erik Erikson’s (1950) fifth “age of man,” identity vs. role confusion. During this stage, individuals feel the conflict between who they believe that they are with what they believe others perceive them to be (Erikson, 1950). Therefore, early adolescence is a time marked by being keenly aware of the differences between the individual and others. If the individual struggles with identity confusion during this stage marked by great change, then he or she is more likely to point out differences in others, even in cruel ways if this highlights the sameness that the individual feels with the greater group. Essentially, the priority at this age is to belong to a group and to feel normal, even at the expense of the feelings of others who may have some differences (Erikson, 1950). The successful passage through this stage relies heavily on a strong foundational childhood experience (Erikson, 1950).

Similarly, Eccles (1999) explains that early adolescence is preceded by a period called middle childhood, which includes ages 6-10. This lays an important foundation for early adolescence. Specifically, this is a period of great change as children’s optimism and self-confidence is challenged against the backdrop of peer comparison and different expectations in new social structures (Eccles, 1999). Perhaps the most pivotal experience in middle childhood is entering the formal structure of school. If a child experiences academic, social or behavioral failure in this setting, this can lead to a sense of inferiority in early adolescence which in turn directly connects to difficulties in middle school (Eccles, 1999).

One key conflict that the young adolescent experiences is the struggle to develop adult qualities and leave childhood behaviors and interests behind (Kiefer & Ellerbrock,
2010). Although it doesn’t happen at exactly the same age or pace for everyone, early adolescence is a time of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth at a rate that they haven’t experienced since infancy (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Eccles, 1999; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Perlstein, 2003; Wormeli, 2001). Infants are not conscious of this growth, while young adolescents are acutely aware of the profound changes that they are experiencing (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Young adolescents do not experience growth and change at the same rate or not necessarily beginning at the same time; this can add an additional element of angst and confusion to the young adolescent who highly values fitting in with peers (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Consider the following description of a young adolescent’s experience:

   Early adolescence is characterized by accelerated yet uneven movements toward reproductive maturity. Hormonal shifts trigger physical transformations such as redistribution of body fat, increases in weight and height, abrupt bone and muscle growth and changes in voice, hair, and complexion. In general, physical maturation begins considerably earlier for girls than for boys. Sexual development prompts new physical, emotional, and social concerns for both sexes. Early or late physical maturation affects self-perception as well as status with peers and adults (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 6).

According to Eccles (1999),

   A central task of adolescence is to develop a sense of oneself as an autonomous individual. The drive for such autonomy derives from the internal, biological processes marking the transition to a more adult role…and from the shifts in
social roles and expectations that accompany these underlying physiological and cognitive changes. (p.37)

This is particularly true for female early adolescents whose physical changes often coincide with the transition into middle school (Eccles 1999).

As these developmental changes emerge, early adolescents are moving from dependence on parents and family to independence (Knowles & Brown, 2000). At the same time, peers become a more prominent influence and parents and families can become less connected. Despite these shifts, young adolescents still desire positive interactions with caring adults (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

Middle school often differs from primary school in grading practices and expectations. Failure to meet higher expectations can lead to confusion. Communication between educator and student often changes as well; middle school students typically see more teachers in a day which lessens communication opportunities between teachers and individuals (San Antonio, 2004; Wentzel, 1997). Coupled with higher expectations, this can be discouraging (Eccles 1999). Additionally, Eccles (1999) notes that changes experienced in the transition to middle school “…are particularly harmful in that they emphasize competition, social competition, social comparison, and self-assessment at a time when the adolescent’s focus on himself or herself is at its height” (p. 40).

Knowles and Brown (2000) state that “middle school students are curious about life and highly inquisitive about everything life has to offer…This curiosity leads to the desire to participate in practical problem solving and activities that reflect real issues” (pp. 20-21). Middle school students want to be engaged in learning (Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008). They desire curriculum and instructional strategies that are relevant to
their lives and their futures. This inevitably includes a discussion about the role of technology in learning; students identify as digital natives (Prensky, 2010) and as a result wish to integrate technology into their learning experiences (Spires et al., 2008). This issue transcends the specific subject of technology; it is really about relevance and preparation for the student’s future; middle school students seek engaging learning opportunities (Spires et al., 2008).

**Conclusion**

This review of literature outlines the history and context of the American middle school, key elements of the learning environment, and the distinct features of the young adolescent learner. This provides a foundation from which to consider how the middle school learner experiences engagement in learning. While disengagement from learning has provided a focus for much educational research, the literature on engagement in the middle level from the perspective of an engaged middle school student is sparse. This study, therefore, will benefit middle level educators who seek to gain a greater understanding of engagement in learning in the classroom by studying structures that support engagement as it is perceived by the middle school learner.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The goal of this research project was to understand engagement in learning at the middle level from the student perspective. The study asked students who identify themselves as engaged in learning to explain how they understand and experience engagement. The study also sought to identify classroom and school structures and strategies that middle school students identify as supporting or hindering engagement in learning.

This was a qualitative study. Creswell (2009) explains that a qualitative study “...is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). More specifically, this was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA draws on the traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Key elements of each of these traditions combine to make IPA a most useful research tradition; phenomenology asserts that humans are constantly in relationship with other beings; it is the interpretation of meaning in these relationships that is central. Hermeneutics suggests that the researcher must closely examine the relationship between the phenomenon and the interpretation of it; this relies on past knowledge and understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, to understand the whole, one must look at the parts, and vice versa. This creates the hermeneutic circle, which provides the researcher the opportunity to dig deeply into the phenomenon in order to make sense of it. Idiography is concerned with the depth in the detail. It is from this tradition that IPA recommends a small research sample in order to provide sufficient focus (Smith et al., 2009).
To summarize, IPA “…is concerned with understanding personal lived experience and thus with exploring persons’ relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). It relies on the actual experience of the phenomenon, rather than simply an account or retelling. It requires a great deal of reflection in order to make meaning of the studied experiences. IPA allows the researcher to examine phenomenon in their own particular contexts, rather than confining these experiences into predefined categories. A small participant pool ensures that the researcher can look closely at the details in their own context in order to understand the particulars of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

**Research Site**

The setting of this study was in a semi-rural 6-8 public middle school in New Hampshire. The population of the city in which the school is located is approximately 17,000. The city has three public elementary schools, one public middle school, one public high school, one vocational school, and three private schools. Approximately 497 students are enrolled in the middle school where this study took place. 59.3% of the middle school population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, compared to the 28.27% state average.

**Participants**

For this study, I considered the lived experiences of six middle school students who identified themselves as highly engaged in learning. Their stories were considered and examined in an effort to understand more deeply how middle school students arrive at and sustain engagement in learning.
All seventh grade students at the research site were invited to participate in a voluntary survey (see Appendix A). Survey questions were based on Fredricks’ theory of engagement, which considers cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, 2011, 2014). The survey was distributed to all students whose parent/guardian signed an informed consent form. Surveys were read and analyzed in order to determine students who self-identified as highly engaged in learning. From this group, I recruited six students to participate in this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical challenges arise at each phase of the research process. Educational research usually includes collecting and sharing data about people (Creswell, 2009). This study involved collecting and sharing data about students. First, it was important to gain permission for participation from the student and the student’s parent or guardian. Permission was requested for two points of data, but first, prior to inviting all seventh grade students to take the initial survey, I explained to them the purpose of the study. I provided students with a cover letter and signed informed consent to share with their parents. Included in permission was a clear explanation of what the study would entail, potential risks, and confirmation of anonymity. It was made clear to participants that they could choose to discontinue their participation at any time without penalty. I explained that the signed form needed to be returned to me in order for the student to participate in the survey or the interviews. On the day after permission slips were due, I provided surveys to students who had signed permission.

After research participants were selected, I met with each student individually. I also called a parent or guardian for each child. I provided more detailed information and
an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I reviewed with students and parents that participation was confidential, voluntary, and could be terminated at any time without penalty.

It was clear to both student participants and their parents that while I am both a district employee and a doctoral student, the primary purpose of this study was to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral thesis. Furthermore, while teachers and administrators naturally have a certain amount of power over students, I have had no direct power over the students who were involved in the study; for example, I have not assigned grades to students. Finally, it was clear to participants that the purpose of this study was not to evaluate teacher performance. The nature of the interview questions provided a focus for participants to share their stories of successful engagement in learning from their own perspective. This is consistent with the purpose of an interpretative phenomenological study, a method for a phenomenon to be studied through the perspective of the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

Researchers also have a responsibility to the profession and to the body of research; as educational researchers, we should make sure that our research is going to make a positive contribution to the field of education (Creswell, 2009). From the initial stages of the study through the analysis, this study was conducted with integrity. I shared the intention of the study with potential participants prior to offering the opportunity for participation. I communicated clearly with participants about the process, explaining that the intention of the study was to give voice to their stories about engagement in learning at the middle level. Finally, analysis focused on themes that naturally emerged from the data (Creswell, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). The research results have been clearly
articulated, and I have sought opportunities to share them with educators who could benefit from this study.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). In-depth interviews were the most suitable method of data collection for an IPA because they provided participants with the opportunity to share their stories about this targeted phenomenon. In this case, interview questions were narrative and descriptive in nature in an effort to support participants sharing their experiences with engagement in learning in the middle school classroom (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were one-on-one, in person interviews, which supported building a positive rapport between the interviewer and each participant (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were semi-structured in order to obtain information that could be compared and contrasted while also allowing room for participants to elaborate naturally and freely (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Strengths of the interview as a data collection method included allowing participants the opportunity to provide historical information and a chance for reflection while allowing the researcher some control over the line of questioning. Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed (Creswell, 2009).

**Data Storage**

Interviews were audio recorded. Recordings were kept on a password protected computer and on a compact disc that was kept in a locked filing cabinet, except for while transcription occurred. Once transcription was complete, the recordings were erased. Pseudonyms were used for each student. Any written documents that link students to their pseudonyms, including consent forms, were kept locked in a filing cabinet and
will remain there for three years. Arrangements have been made for all documents to be shredded in three years.

Data Analysis

First, I transcribed each interview. Then, I read each transcript in order to understand accounts chronologically as well as to identify emerging themes. As I read, I also listened to the audio recording of each interview and jotted down initial notes on a separate paper. I noted anything that jumped out as an interesting idea or concept. Then, I listened to and read each transcript line by line, looking for descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. After I did this with each transcript, I jotted down emergent themes with each individual transcript. I then confirmed each theme by looking for sufficient supportive data. If there were insufficient data, I discarded the theme.

Initial observations and recollections of the interview itself were noted under the heading of exploratory comments. Then, each transcript was re-read in order to consider more deeply how a participant thinks about particular events, issues, and relationships. I made descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 84-91). In the hermeneutic spirit of moving from the part to the whole, I identified emergent themes, and I looked for connections across themes. Through the process of abstraction, similar themes were grouped together in order to create a more robust, overarching theme (Smith et al., 2009). Once themes were identified, I moved to the next transcript, and so on. After each transcript was analyzed for themes, analysis across transcripts happened in the same fashion. Finally, once all transcripts were analyzed, recurrent themes were identified and explained both in narrative form. From this list, I noted which of the six interviews carried the theme. I separated any themes that were present in only one interview because
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) values the individual voice (Smith et al., 2009). These themes, as well as all recurrent themes, are explored in chapter four.

Next, I clearly defined each theme and subtheme. I also listed what counted and what did not count under the theme. Finally, I went back to each individual transcript and coded again, using the clearly defined themes and subthemes. I also noted themes unique to individual transcripts.

**Trustworthiness**

IPA recognizes that researcher bias is a realistic element of this research tradition (Smith et al., 2009). In fact, qualitative research in general considers the researcher’s background to be both pivotal and influential in the study (Maxwell, 2005). In this case, I was clear with the participants that middle level engagement has been an interest for several years based on work experiences. The study sought to identify factors that contribute to engagement at the middle level, a positive and worthwhile study, and so my background served to motivate the study with the goal of identifying data that could serve the greater middle school population.

To confirm the trustworthiness of the data, once interview data was collected, member checking took place. This provided participants the opportunity to confirm that data was recorded in a way that was consistent with their experiences (Maxwell, 2005). This clearly aligns with the goals of this IPA, which seeks to provide the opportunity for middle school students to share their stories of perceived engagement in the middle school classroom.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings of this study. The first section reviews the context of the study. The second section describes the results of the pre-study survey. The third section introduces the study participants. The fourth section defines and explains the themes that emerged from the data. The fifth section provides a summary of the findings in the context of the research questions.

Study Context

The purpose of this study was to understand engagement in learning at the middle level from the perspective of the middle level learner. This was a qualitative study; more specifically, this study followed the guidelines of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA explores the lived experiences of each participant, and the interview process captures the meaning making between the participant, the data, and the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

This study considered the lived experiences of six seventh grade students in a semi-rural middle school in New Hampshire who self-identified as highly engaged in learning. The six student participants were selected based on data collected from a pre-study survey which was completed by twenty seven seventh grade students at the research site. Each of the six students then agreed to participate in a one on one interview.

Pre-Study Survey Results

Of the one hundred forty seven seventh grade students at the research site, twenty nine students returned signed consent forms to participate in the pre-study engagement self-report survey, and twenty seven students took the survey. This survey was adapted from Fredricks’ (2014) sample self-report questions (See Appendix A). The survey posed twenty statements about engagement in learning which students rated on a Likert scale.
Based on survey results, students self-identified as being one of the following: highly engaged in learning most or all of the time, highly engaged in learning some of the time, or highly engaged in learning rarely or none of the time. Six students self-identified as highly engaged in learning most or all of the time. These six students then agreed to participate in the one-on-one interviews.

Table 1 shows that the six study participants who self-identified as highly engaged in learning had consistent responses to several statements on the pre-study survey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>All of the time</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Hardly Ever</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1: I pay attention in class.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2: I work hard to do my best in class.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3: When I am in class, I listen very carefully.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5: I complete my homework on time.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6: I get in trouble at school. (Reverse coded)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9: I enjoy learning new things.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#17: I check my schoolwork for mistakes.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#20: When I finish working a problem, I check my</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Study participants’ consistent answers on pre-study survey

One-on-one interviews with the six students who self-identified as highly engaged in learning provided each student the opportunity to share their own stories about their experiences with engagement in learning at the middle level. The interviews consisted of eleven general questions (see Appendix B). IPA values the individuality of experiences with the phenomenon; therefore, unique questions emerged during each of the six conversations.

Participants

Participant #1: Emma

Emma is an outgoing seventh grader, well known among peers and teachers alike for her athletic interests and abilities. She exudes self-confidence when she interacts with both peers and adults in the learning environment. On the day of the interview just minutes before our scheduled time, I find Emma in her social studies classroom helping her teacher organize papers. They talk and joke about her chattiness in class. “Please take her!” laughs the teacher when I ask if I can talk with Emma for a few minutes. Emma shoots her teacher a mischievous smile as we leave the classroom. We walk down the hallway together, talking about how the end of the school year is quickly approaching. We are occasionally interrupted when Emma exchanges greetings with a friend or teacher. As we enter the library where the interview is going to take place, Emma shares
that she has already looked over the questions that I have provided to her in advance; she says that she is ready to go.

After a general introduction, our interview begins. When I ask Emma what she likes about school, she replies that she likes to be with her friends. She talks about the contexts in which she and her friends like being together, both in classes and after school in the library, studying for tests, and working on assignments. This leads into a conversation about her interest in the Civil War in her social studies class and her eagerness to dissect frogs in science class. She shares several examples of how she studies for tests and works through assignments in order to feel good about her work. Emma speaks about the fear of disappointing her mom with a bad grade. She explains that, “…stress is like a rock; it like brings you down…” She goes on to contrast with the feeling of getting a good grade on her test: “It upbeated my day!” Emma makes it clear that the stress of failure and the conflict between studying and spending time watching sports are the most difficult aspects of school for her.

Participant #2: David

David enters the library on time for his scheduled interview. He greets me with a warm smile and asks me how my day is going. He sustains a polite conversational manner throughout the interview.

David speaks about his interest in math and science. In one of his most thought provoking responses, David recounts how once, when he couldn’t make sense of a math concept, he developed a visual representation of the problem which served as a useful illustration. He shared this visual with a peer who was also struggling with the math concept. David shares that he prefers the challenge of solving a problem over the task of
copying facts that he already knows – a task that he explains is a homework assignment sometimes given by some teachers.

“For me, all school days are usually pretty good,” says David, “But I always feel like they’re better when I feel like I’ve learned something.” He goes on to say, “I usually know that I’ve learned something if I’m interested in it or if I find it hard for me.”

David’s stories of engagement in learning reflect these statements.

**Participant #3: Rachel**

Rachel’s bubbly spirit and enthusiasm shine through her answers, almost audible in the interview recording. She recounts stories from several classes, each time narrating the thoughts that run through her head during class. She reconstructs the suspense that a teacher has created when telling about the fate of King Henry VIII. She describes the excitement of her class preparing for the long awaited rite of passage of frog dissection.

Rachel illustrates her perception of success when she tells the story of how her essay has been chosen as an exemplar for her classmates: “…everyone was just sitting there, ‘wow, that’s really good!’…Well, when she [the teacher] got to the end, she goes, ‘I’d just like to say that that person is in this class, and that person was Rachel,’ and it was kind of exciting.” For Rachel, this is a memorable experience, one that illustrates how both she and her peers are engaged in the lesson.

Rachel shares her frustration with the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) test – a computerized assessment given to all middle school students at the site of this study three times per school year. Her greatest concern with the test is the inability to go back and check her work; once an answer has been submitted, the test moves on. She recognizes the importance of trying her hardest on the test, explaining that it “pays off in
the long run” to do well on the test. Rachel shares strategies that she has used to help herself maintain focus while testing: taking a break, getting a drink of water, and rechecking the problem before submitting an answer help Rachel to stay engaged in the task. Rachel’s stories exude a willingness to work through a challenge and a belief that teachers often play a supporting role in meeting that challenge.

Participant #4: Brianna

Brianna chats her way through the library doors as we set up for the interview. She first greets the school librarian who sits at his desk, confirming with him that all of her library books have been returned. Then she settles into a chair at the table where I sit with the iPad that serves as our recording device for the interview.

Brianna answers each question with ease. She shares her love for learning and school, and she is also open about occasionally struggling with content. Specifically, she notes that she struggles with math problems but persists by trying a number of strategies. She articulates her appreciation for the struggle that often comes with learning: “I feel really great when I’m struggling to understand something and then I finally catch onto it and I understand how to do it, and…it’s really an amazing feeling.”

Brianna is most enthusiastic when she recounts stories of her Spanish class. She says, “…it’s something that I look forward to every day, ‘cause I just, I like the teacher.” She explains that the teacher uses a variety of methods to introduce Spanish cultures and language. Brianna uses this illustration to connect engaging learning activities and the role of the teacher.

Participant #5: Philip
Philip’s interview occurs the day after grade seven has attended Step-Up day activities on the eighth grade floor of the school. When I ask Philip what he likes about school, he speaks about his gratitude for the opportunity to meet his teachers for the following year “…so like we don’t go upstairs and have all these strangers teaching us.” For Philip, developing strong relationships with his teachers is a priority. This is a recurring thread in this interview; he tells stories of helping his teacher with her computer when it isn’t working correctly. He shares his enjoyment in getting to know his teachers.

Philip says that he finds it engaging to use technology in learning. Unique to his interview, Philip talks about technology both in and out of school, making it clear that he is applying what he learns in the classroom both in and out of that learning environment.

**Participant #6: Alyssa**

Although she initially presents as a bit shy, Alyssa is one of the first participants to hand in her permission slips to participate in the study. During the pre-study survey, she maintains incredible focus. When I ask Alyssa about participating in one-on-one interviews, she readily accepts the invitation.

During the interview, Alyssa is focused. She often appears to be trying to give a “right” answer – or to make sure that she is answering correctly. Many times after I pose a question, she pauses, furrows her brow, and then says “Oh!” as if the correct answer has just been revealed to her.

Alyssa talks about school in terms of fun. She recounts stories about kickball games, scavenger hunts, movies, and celebrations that are fun times at school. She also talks about a writing assignment that is fun. In the assignment, she is asked to write a
letter about herself to a younger student. Alyssa likes the assignment. In fact, she says that other than homework, she likes just about everything about school.

**Coding for Themes**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses recognize and value that individual participants have themes that may be unique from other participants. At the same time, through careful analysis, common themes and subthemes may emerge from the data. I identified four common themes among three or more participants. Each theme contains two subthemes. Several interactions with the data ensured thoughtfully developed themes. This section begins with a discussion of common themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The section concludes with a discussion of themes unique to individual participants.

**Common Themes and Subthemes**

**Relationships: “It kept everyone engaged.”** For the purpose of this study, the term relationships refers to interactions and behaviors between two or more people in the educational setting. Specifically, this study considers both positive and negative aspects of relationships between the participant and his or her teachers and peers. This definition does not encompass teachers, peers, and other individuals who share the same learning environment but who do not interact with the participant. Two subthemes emerge from this theme: teacher/student relationships and peer relationships.

The study participants recognize that relationships are part of the learning environment. All six participants identify the dynamics of relationships with both teachers and peers in the educational setting, although each participant has his or her own unique perspective on how relationships relate to engagement in learning. Based on participants’ accounts, the teacher/student relationship is the first subtheme.
Teacher/student relationships: “She made it seem so exciting.” The relationships between the participant and the teachers are comprised of the various interactions that happen in the educational setting. Instructional strategies that the teacher uses to reach the participant, availability to the participant, and participant perceived attitudes toward teaching, learning and students are important elements of this subtheme. Teachers who share the same learning environment, but who do not interact with the participant, are not considered in this study.

Student participants illustrate the role of relationships with teachers in their learning environments. For example, when Brianna talks about how much she looks forward to going to Spanish class each day, she says: “I like the teacher…she tries to describe things differently so that everybody can understand them.” Brianna explains how her Spanish teacher works to reach each student in the classroom through her varied instructional strategies. Having a teacher who teaches about culture through vocabulary lessons, videos, and visuals is a highlight of Brianna’s day. Similar to her Spanish teacher, Brianna explains that “…if there is more than one method, [teachers] will give us multiple options or ways to think about it to help you remember.” David shares this experience; he explains that one of his teachers uses “an array of assignments.” Both David and Brianna present as confident that a teacher’s willingness to instruct in multiple ways is a signal that they are interested in student success; they both report that this has a positive impact on their learning experiences. Rachel has a similar experience, explaining that, “I think each teacher, depending on their teaching style, teaches you the strategy that best goes along with the way that they teach…”cause they definitely want to help the kids in their class do better.” Specifically, Rachel talks about how some teachers regularly
check for understanding; others lead students through reading and study strategies. These teacher actions provide Rachel with the impression that her teachers care about her academic success.

Rachel also talks about respect from teachers. In one case, she recounts the story of a teacher who used her essay as an example for the class. Rachel feels great pride as the teacher leads the class through the essay, pointing out her exemplary writing skills. In another case, Rachel talks about how dissecting a frog is especially exciting in seventh grade because “somebody is actually trusting you do this finally.” Rachel recognizes and appreciates when her teachers respect her.

Participants also recognized that respecting the teacher is a sure sign of engagement in learning. David, Rachel, and Brianna agree that being engaged in learning means listening to the teacher. Additionally, having good eye contact with the teacher, watching the teacher, paying attention, staying focused, and helping the teacher are behaviors that participants consistently identify as helpful in maintaining engagement in learning. Philip extends this concept by suggesting that “…erasing the teacher’s board, or…helping with her computer” are other ways to exhibit engagement in learning.

According to all six participants, if a student is not paying attention, not staying focused, and not maintaining good eye contact, then these are sure signs that the student is not engaged in learning.

**Peer relationships: “I like to be with my friends.”** The interactions between the participant and his or her peers in the educational setting include collaborative social and educational experiences and time spent with one another in the educational setting. These experiences occur both inside and outside of the classroom. They are sometimes
connected with teacher directed learning experiences; other interactions are primarily motivated by the participant and/or his or her peers. Interactions with peers during non-learning days, such as field days, Step Up days, and team celebrations are not considered in this study.

Emma, Philip, and Alyssa state that they like the opportunities to be with friends in the learning environment. Emma elaborates, suggesting that working as partners in class or studying with peers for a test after school makes the learning environment more engaging. Brianna shares that friends can serve an important role in her study strategies; she has friends quiz her and correct her work when studying for certain assignments. David says that working as lab partners in science class is typically a positive experience. When struggling through a particularly difficult math concept, David shares his success with peers who are experiencing the same challenge. David does this in the learning environment, even when it is not part of the teacher directed learning activity.

Rachel describes an experience with approval of her peers in the learning environment. As her teacher reads her essay to the class as an exemplar, her classmates exclaim, “Wow, that’s really good!” She goes on to say that “they were kind of shocked that somebody…this year had written that…it was kind of exciting,” she smiles.

Philip likes the social aspect of being with peers: “We just like to hang out, talk to each other in the halls and everything.” Alyssa acknowledges that while being in the same learning environment as her friends is positive, there are times when engagement means listening to the teacher and not talking to peers. Rachel says that, “…being disengaged would be when you’re talking to your friends when the teacher is explaining something.” Brianna agrees that there are times when interacting with peers distracts
from learning: “…students like to call out when they talk, and they’re laughing and
talking with their friends, and they’re not taking notes or listening to what the teacher has
to say.” In contrast, Brianna says that being highly engaged in an assignment means that
she is not talking to her friends; she is focusing on her notes or her textbook.

**Meaning Making: “I get really interested in how things work.”** This study
considers meaning making as the process of learning about something and understanding
what it means. This theme is comprised of study strategies, content knowledge, and
learning opportunities in the educational environment. Work ethic and classroom
behaviors are separate from this theme.

This theme and the subthemes that surface from the data repeatedly emerge
throughout all six interviews. Each of the participants talk about specific content from the
curriculum that keeps them engaged. All together, the data includes stories about content
learned in social studies, language arts, math, science, Spanish, French, physical
education, and computer classes. Each of the participants also describes strategies that
they use to learn, distinctly separate from strategies that teachers use to teach. For
example, Rachel explains that her teacher reads aloud to her classes and instructs them on
when to highlight a passage for review later; this is a teacher directed strategy. In
contrast, Rachel describes how creating index cards to remember important information
has the power to “imprint specific things in your mind.” She creates the index card on her
own as a strategy to prepare for a routine weekly quiz. These student-directed and
employed strategies make up the first subtheme.

**Study strategies: “note taking and collaborating.”** Study strategies is defined as
individualized approaches to learning. Note taking, collaboration, checking for
understanding, and other participant-directed activities related to learning are considered to be a part of this subtheme. Teacher-directed activities related to learning and classroom behaviors such as listening and paying attention are not included in this subtheme.

Alyssa talks about study strategies that she employs outside of the school day; when studying for a physical education test or language arts spelling quiz she says, “I would have my mom quiz me.” Similarly, Brianna asks her friend to correct her work when she is studying for a map test in social studies. She fills in a blank template, and then based on feedback from her friend, she knows what she needs to study further. Emma asks her sister for help: “I would have my sister help me, like she would say the word, and I would have to give her the French equivalent,” she explains. Emma also explains that she likes to study with her peers and sometimes with the help of her teacher: “…if we have a big test coming up, we will go to the library, or we’ll stay after school with the teacher, and we’ll study together.”

Brianna shares other strategies that she uses: creating mnemonic devices when trying to remember what belongs on a particular map, creating flashcards and writing short stories when studying Spanish vocabulary, filling in summary sheets in social studies class, and reviewing notes as she works through a challenging math problem. She says, “…if we’re doing the problems independently, I find that I struggle with it, and it’s like I have to really think about it and look back in my notes.”

Alyssa also talks about the importance of taking notes. Twice in her interview she states that taking notes is an essential part of the definition of being engaged in learning. For example, at the beginning of the interview when I pose the question, what do you
think it means to be engaged in learning, Alyssa responds, “…to pay attention in class and to take notes that you need to take.” At the end of the interview, she offers, “…just paying attention to your teacher is really important and it helps you with tests and stuff, and taking notes…that helps, too.” Alyssa shares that she finds this skill to be important in her social studies class.

Philip describes a time when taking notes was useful. When I ask him if he can talk about a time when he studied for a test when he felt that his studying paid off, he responds, “A couple of weeks ago we did finals, and I had this whole graph paper full with notes, and then I studied all of them…I got an A!” David also shares about a time when it paid to take notes. When class ended in the midst of completing a writing assignment, David took notes on the side of his paper to remind him where to start the next day, “so that way, the next day, I had something to refer back to.”

Participants share other study strategies that they have used successfully. Emma shares that she writes information repeatedly until she can understand and remember the content. Rachel shares several strategies; she reads and re-reads assigned text, creates index cards with information, checks for understanding, and highlights important information. “It definitely depends on the situation,” she says, when I ask her how she decides which strategy to use: “If we’re given a specific paper, then I definitely use a highlighting skill…it really depends on how the information is presented.”

David believes that if he practices something, it will become easier for him. He applies this to a math problem, “So, the formula for finding the surface area of a cylinder was one that it took me a long time to remember, but I kept doing the problems and practicing, and I eventually remembered it.” He goes on to explain that in this instance,
he used worksheets provided by his teacher to support him as he struggled through the problem, but in the end, he developed his own visual: “I thought about coins being stacked on top of each other.” He says that once the problem made sense to him, he shared his idea with a classmate who was also struggling.

Rachel says that teachers share strategies that “best goes along with the way that they teach” in order to support student learning. One teacher might suggest creating an index card to review the material, while another recommends highlighting main ideas in the text. “They definitely want kids in their class to do better,” Rachel says, suggesting that accessing content through these strategies supports student success.

*Content knowledge: “frogs and toads…dissection of facts.”* Content knowledge is defined as facts and concepts taught in the learning environment. This is comprised of the curriculum that drives the instruction in the participant’s classroom. This subtheme does not include facts and concepts that are not connected to the curriculum taught in the participant’s classroom.

Early in his interview, David states that he prefers math and science to other content areas. Thoughts about both classes weave into the conversation throughout our time together. When I ask him to talk about a class or assignment that he remembers as being a particularly good experience, he talks about his interest in solving a math problem. It drives him to develop his own visual representation of the content in order to grasp the concept more firmly: “I thought about coins being stacked on top of each other,” he says, “I’m just combining these surfaces to get the total area, and I was thinking about it logically and how it would wrap around the circles.” He then moves the discussion to his science class: “I’d say in science class, I’m really interested in the cell
structure...I just like to see how everything works. I get really interested in how things work and why they do what they do.” He talks about the variety of assignments that the science teacher uses to teach; he prefers the labs because they are hands on experiences.

David also talks about his social studies class: “I enjoy social studies class a lot...we did the whole American Revolution as well as the Industrial Revolution this year, and I found that really interesting because it showed us how our nation evolved and formed what it is today.” Other participants discuss the significance of the content taught in their social studies classes. Brianna talks about learning about slavery during the Civil War period: “I just thought it was a very interesting point in time that the country was fighting over the issue of slavery,” she shares. Emma also talks about learning about the Civil War: “I just thought that was really interesting, like the way the two sides were like going back and forth...and the way Generals kind of did things was really unique.” Alyssa also discusses the Civil War and her interest in how slavery impacted the history of the United States; she explains that the teacher used lecture, reading, and video to teach about this topic.

Some participants share about their language class; some participants are enrolled in Spanish class, and others are enrolled in French class. Brianna discusses her Spanish class: “I love going every day because I feel like there’s something...I just love to learn. I love to know that I’ve learned something new every day.” She explains that she feels that she learns something new every day in Spanish class because of the strategies that her teacher uses to teach the content. Lessons consist of vocabulary work, watching a video, and conversation in Spanish. She explains that “I really love learning about the Spanish cultures, and learning the language is a lot of fun.” David and Emma both talk about how
French class requires a significant amount of studying, which they are willing to do in order to learn. They explain that they were given a packet to help them study for an upcoming exam: “French is kind of like a different language so you really need to know like the whole thing,” Emma explains. David agrees; a long review packet is worth the time and effort because, “it really helped me prepare for the test,” he says.

Discussion around frog dissection in science class ensues with several participants. Rachel explains, “Even in sixth grade - that was the one thing you just look forward to in middle school science – I get to dissect a frog!” She describes an agonizing wait from the beginning of the year until the last quarter when frog dissection takes place. She explains how her teacher sets up the exercise by dissecting a frog under the projector first before students participate in the lab. Then, “We got all our tools, so we had our goggles, and then it was just, you wanted to know… you wanted to feel it. You had to touch it. You just really wanted to know what was in there.” Emma agrees, “I was really eager to go in there and be like, oh my gosh, you know look at all the frogs...look at all the insides, ‘cause the insides are kinda like our insides.” In this way, Emma connects the frog dissection lab with learning more about herself.

When I ask David to talk about an interesting assignment, he also talks about the frog dissection lab. He explains that he prepared for this lab carefully, looking over his procedure list and making sure that he was following directions in order. He says that it is important to go slowly when participating in the frog dissection lab because “once you start dissecting, you can’t go back and look because you’ve removed things.” Rachel explains that part of the draw to frog dissection is that “somebody is actually trusting you...
to do this finally, and the fact that it’s something that you’ve never done before. I think anything that’s new is exciting.”

**Work Ethic: “I feel really great when I’m struggling.”** For the purpose of this study, work ethic is defined as the intrinsic belief that hard work is valuable. This includes student behaviors related to learning in the learning environment and the ability to persevere. This does not include teacher rewards or tasks that participants consider to be easy. To illustrate, Brianna explains that, “I feel really great when I’m struggling to understand something and then I finally catch onto it and understand how to do it.”

David says, “I usually know that I’ve learned something if I’m interested in it or if I find it hard for me…if I practice it more it will get easier, and I will learn it. Participants describe how perseverance is sometimes needed to successfully complete a task.

**Perseverance: “I didn’t want to lose my train of thought.”** For the purpose of this study, perseverance is defined as the ability to keep trying in spite of conflict, challenge, or difficulty. This study considers perseverance in the context of completing a long or challenging task or assignment, personal conflict that occurs between the participant and the assigned task, and confusion about an assignment. Easy and abandoned tasks do not fit in this subtheme.

Brianna elaborates on how her struggles in math class ultimately create a positive experience for her, “I don’t catch on to what we’re doing very easily, especially with Geometry, like finding area and volume…that really kind of confuses me. So when I finally figure out how to do stuff like that…it’s really helpful.” I ask her if she can recall a specific story when she persevered through a specific problem and finally got it. “Um, well, it kind of happens a lot,” she admits.
Rachel talks about the need to persevere through tests. She explains that tests are an important part of her overall grade in a class, which is one reason why it is important to try your hardest. “It’s also gonna help the teacher to understand whether you understand what she’s teaching,” she explains. For Rachel, the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test is a challenge that she must overcome three times each year. This is a computerized test that the school administers to measure student growth in the areas of reading and math. “Those are tough, but I know that if I keep going and if I do a good job that it will pay off in the long run.”

Emma talks about perseverance in the context of studying when she would rather be watching television: “I had to keep working, and it was a really hard test for me…I just kinda had to keep studying it,” she explains, and then she admits that eventually she must turn off the television so that she can focus on her studying.

Participants also explain how they persevere when they are given an overwhelming or confusing task, particularly related to studying for a test. Both David and Emma describe a multipage test review packet for French class. Both David and Emma explain that at first, they do not know how or where to begin studying. David proceeds and works through the packet on his own. Emma goes through the packet first and highlights the parts where she needs to focus her attention, and then she employs her sister’s help to check for understanding.

Alyssa describes a math assignment that comes with few directions: “…we just had to figure it out.” She explains the process of creating a catapult for a class contest. It involves nailing pieces of wood together and utilizing rubber bands, all within the
required measurements for the contest. Philip finds himself in a similar situation when he is faced with the task of creating an atoms project in science class. He problem solves by determining the materials he will need and asking his mom for help in acquiring the materials.

When I ask Alyssa to recount a story where she struggled through a class or an assignment, she talks about the gory details of the frog dissection lab, “…it was really gross, like the frog intestines, and I didn’t want to get a bad grade on it, so I just kept working on it, and I just tried to ignore all the gore.” While participants’ anecdotes that fall under the subtheme of perseverance range from stories about grappling with content to figuring out the logistics of a project, Rachel clearly summarizes the approach of each of the six participants: “Sometimes there’s something that you really don’t want to do, but no matter what, you just go and you do it, and it pays off in the long run.”

Classroom behaviors: “being a participant.” Classroom behaviors are defined as behaviors that support or challenge the ability for learning to take place in the classroom. Focus, taking initiative, paying attention, and listening make up this subtheme. Study strategies that are related to meaning making, such as making flashcards or checking for understanding, are not considered in this subtheme.

Participants share several classroom behaviors that fit either in the category of behaviors that signal engagement in learning or behaviors that signal disengagement from learning. “What do you think it means to be engaged in learning?” I ask each participant. “People looking at the teacher or the speaker. People writing notes about what’s going on in the class. Being a participant. Asking questions when you need to ask questions,” says Philip. Rachel agrees that asking questions is an important behavior to exhibit in class.
Alyssa adds to this list of classroom behaviors; she talks about paying attention, respecting the teacher, and not talking to your friends when the teacher is teaching. Emma elaborates: “It means you’re like really listening to what’s going on; you’re, you know, you’re really taking in all the learning...you’re not getting distracted.” Brianna believes that classroom behaviors that signal engagement in learning begin with “[taking] your work very seriously.” David explains, “You should probably be taking notes, either mentally or physically.” When I ask him to elaborate on this, he says, “the person would have to be watching the teacher...the person would have to be listening well, not distracted by others...I sometimes have the ability to just really focus and zero in on the teacher.”

In contrast, participants believe that certain classroom behaviors signal that a student is disengaged from learning. Rachel suggests that these behaviors include choosing to focus on someone or something other than the teacher. David elaborates; he suggests that not having good eye contact with the teacher and staring at the clock are behaviors exhibited by students who are disengaged from learning. Alyssa adds to this list when she describes “talking during class, or fooling around with your classmates.” Philip also suggests the absence of a student raising his hand, asking questions or “not doing basically anything” are also common behaviors exhibited by disengaged students. “You’re just saying, well, I don’t really care about it, and you rush through it, and you don’t take your time and try your best,” explains Brianna. Emma describes this as a student having “no mind to be learning or there.”

As Rachel struggles to persevere through the NWEA Map test, she considers behaviors in the testing area that will support her ability to perform well. “…maybe get
up, get a drink of water” she suggests. Similarly, David talks about the behaviors that he exhibits as he works through a writing assignment in language arts class. He talks about writing, drafting, and “crossing things out in pen.” These classroom behaviors prepare him to finish the assignment on the following day. Brianna stays focused on her work by looking through her notes and textbook and not talking to her friends. Rachel highlights text as directed by the teacher and “go[es] over material” in class.

In her final interview comment, Alyssa revisits helpful classroom behaviors. She says: “…paying attention to your teacher is really important and it helps you with tests and stuff, and taking notes…that helps, too.” These are behaviors that each participant has discussed as part of what has made them remain successfully engaged in learning.

**Success: “It just made me feel better.”** In the context of this study, the term success is defined as the attainment of a desired outcome or an accomplishment. This theme is comprised of outcomes that meet goals and values defined by the participant, and outcomes for the participant that meet goals and values defined by the teacher or the academic environment. The learning process and the inability to meet an outcome are not included in this theme.

Emma distinguishes between success that she measures and success measured by others. For example, she talks about the importance of completing assignments in order to get a good grade. In some cases, this teacher assigned grade is motivation to complete a task that is not engaging because it means that her teacher or her mom will be pleased. In other cases, she feels successful when she can complete a test with ease because she has studied. This is separate from a grade or feedback from others. “You feel proud of what you just did,” she explains.
Rachel shares about attending a state math meet at a nearby university: “We got our results, and we got to watch the top kids [as determined by the judges] compete against each other.” Although not a top competitor in terms of final scores, for Rachel, “it was a really good experience.” Two subthemes explore the differences between successful outcomes based on goals and values defined by the teacher or the learning environment versus those defined by the participant.

**Extrinsic success: “I can tell it pays off when I get a good grade.”** Extrinsic success, or success that is defined by meeting the goals set by the teacher or the academic environment, include grades and teacher approval. Interactions with teachers, peers or content which are not defined by a grade or other teacher or education driven goal are not considered in this subtheme.

For Alyssa, the thought of winning a catapult competition in math class is engaging, but receiving a good grade is also a measure of success. When I ask her how she did in the contest, she replies, “We didn’t win. It didn’t go very far. But I still got a 100% on it ‘cause it like launched.” Alyssa sees this as a successful project because of the 100% she earned.

Other participants mention success in terms of earning a 100% or an A on an assignment or test. Philip says that he knows that studying for a math test until midnight paid off “’cause I got an A on it.” Alyssa knows that she is successful in her PE class when she earns a 95 on a test. David speaks at length about working on math concepts. He knows that his study strategies have paid off when he receives A’s on the assignments. “I can tell it really pays off when I get a really good grade on my test,” says Brianna, when I ask her how she knows that studying has paid off. When I ask her for
another example of success in the classroom, she mentions that she knows that she has never received lower than a 97% in her Spanish class, and she currently has a 100% in the class. “I think tests are always a really big thing that you try your hardest for because you know not only is it going to take up quite a bit of your grade, but it’s also gonna help the teacher to understand whether or not you understand what she’s teaching,” explains Rachel.

Emma illustrates the role of grades in her motivation to do well. She perseveres through a math assignment that asks her to record herself singing, an assignment that she describes as something that she does not feel comfortable doing. Despite her hesitation, she knows that she should do the assignment “‘cause it would bring my grade up.” When she talks about doing well on a challenging test, she explains, “I knew that if it was really bad, I knew it could bring down my grade. And when I got it, it was a better grade than I had thought it would be, and it was really exciting to see!”

Alyssa describes a culminating event that takes place to honor students who have been successful, as measured by grades. Students who earn a C or higher in every class are invited to a team celebration. Its purpose is to “recognize students that like achieved or, like, they didn’t get in trouble…we ate food, and we just played games the whole entire day.” Alyssa describes this as a really great day to be in school.

**Intrinsic success: “I remembered a lot.”** Intrinsic success, or outcomes that meet the goals and values defined by the participant, include positive interactions with peers, teachers, or academic content, which is not measured by a grade or teacher approval.

Emma talks about how motivating it is to know that she will be successful with an assignment because she is comfortable with the material. In one case, the assignment,
a math review packet, is checked for completion but is not assessed by the teacher. Emma says, “I was really engaged to do it ‘cause I knew everything on it.” For Emma, it is rewarding to be able to finish the assignment for her own practice.

Rachel talks at length about a time when her teacher used her essay as an example for the class. She explains that “[the teacher] said it was a really good example that she had been looking for for writing.” Rachel does not mention the grade that she earned on the essay; instead, her recounting of the story focuses on how it is clear to her, her teacher, and her peers in the classroom that she has written a solid essay. Her classmates recognize that she has used good wording in the essay and are shocked that the essay has been written by one of their peers. “It was kind of exciting,” smiles Rachel.

For Brianna, a successful day at school involves learning: “It’s really an amazing feeling because I feel like I learned something and I can make use of it,” she explains. She offers the example of her Spanish class; she feels that she learns something new every day in this class. Similarly, David feels like his best days at school are when he has learned something. “If I accomplish something in learning that day, I feel like it’s a better day,” he explains. For him, being successful in learning includes remembering what he has learned and being able to apply it. He talks about how he feels that he learned a lot in his grade six math class that he was able to draw upon in his current math class. “I remembered a lot of stuff from last year,” he says when I ask him about a time when studying paid off for him.

**Themes Unique to Individuals**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses value both themes and subthemes that connect the data and themes and subthemes that arise in individual accounts of meaning.
making related to the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). This assures that each voice is valued and considered in the overall analysis of the data. Two themes unique to individual participants emerged from this study.

**Alyssa: fun.** For the purpose of this study, fun is used to describe an event or activity in the learning environment that is entertaining or amusing. Throughout her interview, Alyssa revisits the idea of fun at school. While the focus of the interview is on engagement in learning, Alyssa often shifts the focus to days that are not traditional teaching and learning days. She explains, “I like coming to school and being with my friends…it’s fun.” When I ask her to give me an example of a day or a part of day at school that she considered to be really great, she talks about a particular day when she was able to engage in a game of kickball, take part in a scavenger hunt, and watch a movie, all with her peers: “…hanging out with friends and getting away from school…it’s like, I don’t know…more fun than doing school work,” she explains. Alyssa also shares about team celebration days, which are devoted to celebrating the achievements of students who have received all C’s or higher on their report cards. In one of her final comments, she shares about a math project that involves constructing a catapult for a competition. She uses the word “fun” to describe the experience of working with a peer to construct the catapult, and then she explains that the contest itself was probably the most exciting part of the project for her. “We didn’t win. It didn’t get very far. But I still got 100 on it ‘cause it launched,” she explains. Alyssa’s repetition of the concept of fun in the learning environment is a theme that is distinctly unique from the other interviews.
Philip: technology. For the purpose of this study, technology encompasses any technological devices that are part of engaging experiences in the learning environment. Specifically, this theme focuses on the use of computers in teaching and learning.

Alyssa, Brianna, and David each mention that videos are used as an instructional strategy in one of their classes. Rachel talks about the NWEA Map test that is administered on school computers to each student three times per year. Emma talks about recording her voice and sending it to her math teacher for an assignment. Philip is the only participant who consistently emphasizes the role that technology plays in his learning experiences throughout his interview. He first mentions technology when he states that one way to be a participant in class is to help the teacher with her computer “if it’s being…like bad to her, if it’s not working.” He also talks about a time when he was particularly interested in class: “Computer class last year,” he says, without pause. “We were working on the computers. We were making our own websites, and I thought that was pretty cool.” Deeper questioning reveals that he extended this activity outside of the classroom and worked with a relative who is tech savvy: “…he fixes all these computers and stuff. And then he taught me some stuff about it.” He explains that a month after he learned about creating websites in class, he developed his own website for fun – a hub for several websites of interest to him. In his final comments, he explains that he uses technology to contact his teacher if he has a question: “I sometimes email her to ask questions and stuff.”

Summary of Findings

Interview Question #1
The purpose of this study was to answer two questions. The first question was:

How do middle school students who identify themselves as engaged in learning understand and experience engagement?

The data suggest several ways in which middle school students who identify themselves as engaged in learning understand and experience engagement:

**Meaning making through study strategies.** Each of the student participants identify self-directed strategies that they employ in order to engage in the learning process. These students experience and participate in learning by engaging strategies that they have found to be useful in making meaning of the assigned material. These strategies include reviewing notes, creating flashcards, developing mnemonic devices, employing peers, siblings or parents to provide feedback and quiz the participant on the material, and developing visuals to better understand a concept – all strategies that students have developed and perfected and that are separate from the assignment given by the teacher.

**Perseverance.** Each of the student participants discuss their ability to persevere when an assignment is challenging. Participants describe a challenging assignment by giving specific examples; for one participant, it was challenging to maintain focus on an assignment. For another student, it was challenging to persevere through a project when he didn’t have all of the required materials to complete it. For others, the concept or directions of the assignment itself posed a challenge. In each of these situations, the participant recognizes the necessity to work through the problem. One participant notes the importance of persevering because it will pay off “in the long run.” Each of the six participants recognizes times when learning has been challenging; each of the
participants also acknowledge the role that perseverance plays in his or her ability to remain engaged in the learning process.

**Classroom behaviors.** Participants acknowledge that they exhibit specific behaviors in the classroom setting when they are engaged in learning. This includes a respectful approach to the teacher which may be demonstrated in a number of ways: by maintaining eye contact when the teacher is teaching, staying focused, listening, asking questions, and helping the teacher. A few participants articulate that they are able to maintain these behaviors despite disruptions from peers.

**Intrinsic success.** Student participants understand that success that involves intrinsic rewards is part of the engaging learning experience. For example, one participant describes experiences where she was so familiar with the material being tested that she felt successful during the testing experience. Another is highly engaged in a class when her essay is used as an example for the rest of the class. Other participants speak more generally about the feeling of success when they know that they have learned something new. For each of these participants, they understand that engagement in learning yields personal success.

**Fun.** One student understands engagement in learning through the lens of fun. She draws upon several experiences at school which are separate from traditional learning experiences, and she describes them as fun. She uses the term fun to describe both the task and the opportunity to be with friends in the learning environment. She connects the concept of engagement in learning with fun.

**Technology.** One participant understands engagement through his experiences with technology. His interest in technology reaches beyond the school day; he engages in
learning outside of the classroom and teacher directed assignments, but he also recognizes that he is highly engaged in school when technology is present.

**Interview Question #2**

The second question was: What classrooms and school structures and strategies do middle school students identify as supporting or hindering engagement?

The data suggest several school structures and strategies that the participants identify as supporting engagement in learning.

**Teacher relationships.** Positive relationships and interactions with teachers support engagement in learning, according to study participants. Participants explain how several teachers use a variety of assignments and teaching methods to deliver the curriculum. Participants believe that teachers want their students to be successful; this notion supports participants in maintaining engagement in assignments and tasks. In one story, a participant acknowledges that she felt that her teachers exhibited respect for her as a student and an individual; this was highly motivating for her.

**Opportunities to learn with peers.** Several participants recognize that when the school environment provides opportunities for students to learn with peers, then they experience a more highly engaged learning experience. This includes opportunities to work with partners in class, study with peers during and after school, and assisting peers who are struggling to understand a concept. Participants recognize that a student who is highly engaged in learning should be able to discern between a time when working with a peer is supportive of the educational goals of the class, and when it detracts from the focus; specifically, when a teacher is providing direct instruction to the class, this is not an ideal time to work with a peer.
**Engaging Content.** Each participant talks about course content that they find highly engaging. The courses the participants discuss include social studies, language arts, science, math, physical education, computers, French, and Spanish. In each case, students recount specific content that they find to be engaging, either because there is an element of relevance to their own lives, or because the content is revealed in an engaging manner, including enthusiasm exhibited by the teacher.

**Extrinsically rewarded success.** Participants acknowledge that they are motivated by grades that teachers assign their work. Several participants note that they know that they are successful with an assignment by the grade that they receive (an A or 100%). In one case, a student recognizes that while she did not win a class competition for a project that she created, she still felt successful because her teacher gave her a 100% for the assignment. In another case, a student acknowledges that the team celebration – a daylong celebration for students who earn a C or higher in their classes and who do not exhibit poor behavior – is highly engaging and motivating.

Participants recognize several classroom behaviors that students exhibit when they are disengaged from learning, which may suggest that they hinder engagement in learning. These behaviors include not paying attention in class, not having good eye contact with the teacher, staring at the clock instead of the teacher or speaker, talking to friends when the teacher is talking, not participating in class, and not asking questions.

This chapter introduced the student participants and the themes and subthemes that emerged from their stories. Chapter five considers this data through the frameworks of both engagement theory and stage environment fit theory. Chapter five also places this data in the context of the literature that was reviewed in chapter two.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Purpose of the Study

Engagement in learning at the middle level is a key indicator of academic success at the high school level (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007). While it is evident that middle school students can experience great success with academic achievement (Yecke & Finn, 2005), engagement in learning often declines during the middle school years (Eccles et al., 1993; Wang & Dishion, 2012). The school environment can play a pivotal role in the relationship between the middle level learner and engagement in learning (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Eccles, 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to understand how the middle school student who self-identifies as highly engaged in learning experiences and understands engagement in learning. The study considered the middle level learner and the learning environment. Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in learning were considered in this study (Fredricks et al., 2004). Both stage-environment fit theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles, 1999; Hunt, 1975) and engagement theory (Fredricks, 2011; Fredricks et al., 2004) provided the framework for this study. This study was grounded in a review of the literature on the American middle school, the learning environment, and the middle school learner.

Reviewing the Methodology

This was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative study methodology which considers the lived experiences of participants in relation to the phenomenon studied (Smith et al., 2009). In this case, the participants were six middle school students who self-identified as highly engaged in learning. The phenomenon studied was engagement in learning at the middle level. The analysis focused on how
each participant made sense of the phenomenon of engagement in learning through his or her lived experiences with it.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

Both the theoretical frameworks and the reviewed literature informed my analysis of the data which was presented in chapter four. Stage-environment fit theory supported my analysis of data that connected each middle level learner with his or her lived experiences in a particular learning environment. Likewise, engagement theory supported my thinking about how the participants described their engagement with learning. Similarly, the exploration of literature about the American middle school, the learning environment, and the middle level learner served as a base from which to understand and consider how these participants describe being middle level learners who self-identify as highly engaged most or all of the time.

It became evident through this study that highly engaged middle school students experience engagement as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Based on this study, there is evidence that a relationship exists between engagement in learning and each of the following: varied instructional strategies, student initiated study strategies, supportive relationships in the learning environment, the ability to persevere, and motivation to succeed. Some of these findings rely on the learning environment, while others are qualities unique to the highly engaged learner.

**Varied Instructional Strategies: Middle School Students Benefit from Multiple Points of Entry**

Middle school students, regardless of learning style, academic ability, and stage of adolescent development, can understand a connection to being able to make sense of the
content presented in the learning environment with being highly engaged in learning. The students in this study explain that they are able to make sense of the content because their teachers support their understanding through the use of a variety of instructional methods in an effort to reach each student. The instructional methods include visual, hands on, audio, and verbal methods which address the strengths of the students in the learning environment (Gardner, 2011). Similarly, Fredricks’ (2011) theory of engagement in learning acknowledges that engaging teachers appropriately differentiate instruction in order to take into account the student as an individual learner. Differentiated instruction, or academically responsive instruction, involves considering the readiness, interest, and learning profile of each student in the learning environment (Brighton et al., 2003).

Stage-environment fit theory also recognizes the necessity of providing developmentally appropriate learning activities in the classroom, including meaningful interactions with both peers and the teacher that support learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The idea of providing developmentally appropriate structures and strategies poses a challenge for the middle school teacher because middle school students are uniquely diverse in terms of development. This current study supports the assertion of stage environment fit theory, that the correct fit between student and learning environment is essential to engagement in learning; this can only be achieved when teachers provide developmentally appropriate and effectively differentiated learning activities so that students can access the course content. It is powerful for the middle school educator to understand that the learning environment controls which instructional strategies are used in the classroom.
Study Strategies: Highly Engaged Students Use Self-Initiated Strategies that Support Learning

Separate from the teacher’s role in supporting students in making sense of the content is what highly engaged students describe as having a toolbox of study strategies that they know how and when to use in order to support the learning that is taking place in the classroom. Students must be able to independently access these strategies both in and outside of the learning environment; for example, a student needs to understand how to effectively take notes during class instruction. She also needs to understand how to review and study from those notes outside of the classroom. Csikszentmihalyi (1986) supports this finding in his discussion of engagement; he suggests that engagement produces growth because there is an active relationship between the participant and the learning environment or task. Highly engaged students take the initiative to employ study strategies that make them an active participant in the learning process.

Furthermore, this finding illustrates what stage-environment theory highlights as a developmental desire for greater autonomy and control over the learning environment; young adolescents desire greater responsibility for their lives, including their learning (Hunt, 1975). According to my study, students who are able to select and apply appropriate study strategies are highly engaged in learning.

Young adolescents find themselves between childhood and adulthood, and development happens at different rates for each individual (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Eccles, 1999). Regardless of their rate of growth, Eccles (1999) states that middle childhood (ages 6-10), which is the stage just prior to early adolescence, sets the foundation for the success of the young adolescent in terms of a successful transition
to greater autonomy. The development of effective study strategies, then, must begin during the middle childhood stage, which coincides with elementary school, so that the young adolescent can develop the study skills necessary to make sense of the content in their middle school classrooms. It is clear from the participants in this study that they understand which study strategies work best for particular assignments.

**Supportive Relationships in the Learning Environment: Learning is Social and Collaborative**

The students in this study experience learning as a social and active process. Engagement theory concurs; engagement in learning produces growth because of the active relationship between the learner and the learning environment (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1986). The people who make up the learning community play a crucial role in the learning environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes both the teacher and a student’s classmates.

The highly engaged students in this study explain that the most engaging learning experiences involve active and intentional interactions between the learner and the teacher that result in a collaborative approach to learning. The students illustrated this concept with stories of teachers who showed interest in the content and in the learners by using various instructional strategies in response to the needs of the students in the classroom, using student work as an exemplar for the class, and entrusting students with challenging and interesting tasks. This connects to the literature that suggests that teachers who facilitate democratic classrooms experience more success with student engagement; this includes relevant curriculum, authentic learning, and choice in the learning environment (Cunningham, 2006; Strong et al., 2001; Wolk, 2003). This study
suggests that middle school students have the ability and the interest in collaborating with both teachers and peers, particularly on effective instructional strategies. Given what we know about the ever changing need for support versus autonomy in the middle school classroom, honoring student voice as part of the instructional design process can be highly beneficial.

Positive interactions between the student and his or her peers can also create or enhance meaningful learning experiences. The students in this study articulate the role that peers can play in the learning environment. They enthusiastically connect with their peers during learning experiences both inside the classroom and after school hours. They acknowledge that there are times when peer interaction conflicts with learning and express frustration with peers who are unable to make this distinction because it interrupts the learning environment. As young adolescents shift from dependence on adults to independence, peer relationships become more powerful and influential (Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2010; Wang & Dishion, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012); collaboration and engagement with positive peer role models are both ways in which the peer relationship can support learning (Fredricks, 2011). The highly engaged students in the study report positive collaboration with peers that supports their learning. In particular, students noted with enthusiasm experiences where they were able to support the learning of others in the classroom. This finding is dependent upon both the learning environment that provides opportunities for collaboration and upon the learner who must participate in collaborative learning.

**Perseverance: Highly Engaged Students Overcome Learning Obstacles**
Each of the middle school students in this study demonstrate the ability to describe and access the supports necessary to persevere in the face of learning challenges. Based on this study, the term challenge can refer to difficult content or concepts; it can also refer to maintaining focus over an extended period of time or despite significant distractions. However the individual student defines the term challenge, the middle level student who self-identifies as highly engaged also articulates an understanding of what perseverance is and how to access and maintain it in the face of challenge.

Engagement theory often looks at supports and influences outside of the student that promote a student’s engagement in learning (Fredricks, 2011); this study suggests that students are able to identify structures and supports that sustain perseverance. Pink (2009) asserts that human beings have a natural drive to be engaged, but that engagement can be reversed by a negative experience. Yet, this study of six highly engaged seventh graders uncovered stories of challenging situations that the participants overcame. Stage-environment fit suggests that the environment itself, which consists of place, time, physical features, activity and participants, must be developmentally appropriate in order to support engagement in learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Young adolescents face great change in a short amount of time; this challenges the individual’s self-confidence (Eccles, 1999). This study illustrates how despite this challenge, the highly engaged middle school student can recognize how perseverance benefits academic growth.

Motivation: Highly Engaged Students are Motivated to Succeed in the Learning Environment

Students who self-identify as being highly engaged in learning can also identify stories and experiences where they felt successful in the learning environment. In fact,
according to the participants in this study, this success was a motivating factor for sustained interest and engagement in the learning activity and environment. Students measured success in several ways including grades earned on assignments, teacher approval and praise, and successfully learning new material or a challenging concept. The most striking stories of success came from students who believed that they had successfully learned. These stories were marked by a distinct enthusiasm; students elaborated on what they learned and how they felt when they achieved success. This indicates the importance of providing students with the necessary supports and structures in the learning environment to be successful. This does not necessarily connote success as measured by a grade, but rather success as measured by the true sense of accomplishment.

Both emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement theory support this finding (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to engagement theory, students who experience feelings of happiness at school are highly engaged emotionally. Students who desire to be both challenged and then to succeed in the learning environment are highly engaged cognitively (Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2011). The students in this study described happiness and satisfaction when they were successful.

Stage-environment fit theory asserts that the environment must fit the developmental needs of the student in order for success to occur (Eccles et al., 1993). The relationship between the developmentally appropriate learning environment and the success of the middle level learner is perhaps the most striking finding of this study. Beyond this fundamental relationship between environment and learner, though, is the idea that academic success at the middle level is a culminating factor that relies on three
things: the relationships in the learning environment, the individual’s access to the content, and the ability to persevere in the face of constant growth and challenge.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to address the problem of disengagement from learning at the middle level by exploring the experiences of highly engaged middle school students. Specifically, this study sought to answer the research questions: How do middle school students who identify themselves as engaged in learning understand and experience engagement, and what classroom and school structures and strategies do middle school students identify as supporting or hindering engagement? The methodology used to conduct this study looked at the phenomenon of engagement in learning at the middle level through the lived experiences of six middle school students who self-identify as highly engaged in learning. Although it should be noted that the experiences of a highly engaged middle school learner may differ from those of a middle school student who has become disengaged from learning, both engagement and stage environment fit theories offer insight into the middle school learner in general. Also, this study considered the rich literature on the American middle school, the learning environment, and the young adolescent learner. In this context, the five major findings that evolved from this study can provide meaningful insight for all middle school students. Based on these findings, the following implications for practice should be considered:

**Implication #1: Middle Level Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

We must develop curriculum, instructional, and assessment strategies that reach a diverse group of learners. This diversity is unique at the middle level because in addition to considering learning style and academic ability, middle school teachers must consider
that young adolescents develop at various rates. Therefore, our focus must include differentiated instruction focused on diverse learning styles, academic ability, and stage of development. We must also design and facilitate opportunities for peer collaboration in the learning environment. Because middle school students develop at varying rates, and because we must constantly strike the appropriate balance between support and challenge, we must also consider scaffolding support in a way that is responsive to the changing needs of the student.

We must also recognize that learning is a collaborative and social process which relies heavily on positive relationships between the teacher and the student. We should provide opportunities for students to participate in decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This includes providing choice for students whenever possible. We should seek out the voices of our students in order to provide opportunities for active participation in developing and implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

**Implication #2: Study Strategies**

Based on this study, students often develop strategies or learn strategies from teachers that are then internalized and utilized when appropriate. Therefore, we must support students in identifying the strategies that work best for them. This includes exposing students to a variety of study strategies that might support the learning that is taking place in the classroom. This also requires that we support each student in understanding who he or she is as a learner. This includes supporting each student to develop a self-awareness about his or her learning style. As educators, we must embrace the diversity of student learners in our classrooms as we address this need.
Implication #3: Perseverance

We must help students to define, identify and sustain perseverance; we must support students in their understanding of how perseverance positively supports academic achievement. We must provide adequate support to each student so that all middle level learners experience and value this key element of engagement. Moreover, we must help students identify and learn how to access the supports and strategies that allow them to persevere in the face of challenge. This clearly connects with the implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment; students must have individualized and developmentally appropriate opportunities to develop their understanding of their abilities to persevere and succeed. We must provide opportunities for students to experience authentic success in the learning environment. This means seeking out real opportunities for students to engage in learning that is meaningful to them and appropriately supporting them in the learning process. This requires asking students to participate in challenging learning tasks that will give them a sense of accomplishment when they have truly succeeded.

Implications for Research

The implications for research include the addition of information that this study contributes to the literature on engagement in learning in middle school. Additionally, the results of this study suggest several considerations for future research. These considerations are based on both the identified limitations of this study and on the results themselves, which present thought provoking ideas about the nature of engagement in learning in middle school.

Contribution to Literature
This study was grounded in literature about the American middle school, the learning environment, and the young adolescent. The five major findings that emerged from this study clearly connect with this literature. In some cases, the findings add to the literature that already exists. For example, while the literature suggests that students desire to be engaged in meaningful learning experiences (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Spires et al., 2008), this study highlights the student’s role in developing and accessing appropriate study strategies that support understanding; this in turn supports engagement in learning, according to this study. Stage-environment fit theory suggests that young adolescents are capable of making independent choices at varying rates (Hunt, 1975); this study concludes that the highly engaged middle school learner has achieved this capability. Additionally, while stage-environment fit recognizes that the young adolescent requires the appropriate level of support in order to be successful (Eccles et al., 1993), this study clearly illustrates that the highly engaged student has a distinct understanding and awareness of perseverance and its role in academic success. Finally this study gives voice to the highly engaged middle school student by the very nature of the research design. While there are significant bodies of literature that provide information about the American middle school, the learning environment, and the young adolescent, this study adds the essential voice of the middle school student herself. This is a unique and notable focus of this study.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study intentionally followed the unique and specific guidelines of an interpretative phenomenological analysis, which relies heavily on the lived experiences and ensuing meaning making of individuals connected with a phenomenon. Interpretative
phenomenological analysis thrives on a small sample size; this allows the researcher the opportunity to consider carefully and deeply the meaning making of the individual. One limitation of this study may be the small sample size used for analysis. Additionally, this study was conducted in one semi-rural middle school; only seventh grade students participated. Finally, it was the intention of this study to rely solely on the voice of the highly engaged middle school student. Only students who self-identified as highly engaged participated in the study; test scores and teacher input was not considered. Neither family involvement nor socioeconomic status were considered. With this in mind, future studies might consider any of the following:

- Repeat the study in a suburban or urban middle school.
- Repeat the study with consideration of socioeconomic status.
- Repeat the study with other middle school aged students - either sixth grade or eighth grade students.
- Repeat the study with students who self-identify as being disengaged from school most or all of the time.
- Consider the voices of middle school teachers to understand their experiences with engagement in learning at the middle level.
- Consider the voices of parents of middle school students to understand their experiences with engagement in learning at the middle level.

Furthermore, this study clearly points to a relationship between student engagement in learning and a student’s understanding of the importance of perseverance
in the face of challenging situations. It would be interesting to consider more closely the relationship between perseverance and the middle school learning environment. Similarly, future research about how influences outside of the middle school learning environment can support or hinder the development of study strategies and the ability to discern how and when to use which one, and how influences outside of the middle school learning environment can support or hinder the development of perseverance in the face of challenging situations.

**Conclusion**

It was the intention of this study to learn from middle school students who self-identify as highly engaged in learning in an effort to better understand how to support students who struggle to remain engaged in learning. While we cannot assume that what works for engaged students will necessarily work for students who are already disengaged, the findings from this study will hopefully help middle level educators consider how to support all students in sustaining engagement in learning.

Specifically, five findings emerged from this study. First, highly engaged middle school students report that they benefit from a variety of instructional strategies in order to understand content. This is consistent with engagement theory which suggests that students are able to engage in learning when teachers understand students as unique learners and when instruction is effectively differentiated (Fredricks, 2011). This is also supported by stage-environment fit theory which suggests that there must be an effective relationship between the learning environment and the learner; this requires that instructional strategies consistently meet the ever-changing needs of the young adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles, 1999). This finding is also supported on the literature
about best practices in middle level education, which includes a focus on differentiated instruction and authentic learning opportunities (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Dewey, 1915; Oliveira et al., 2013).

Second, highly engaged middle school students experience learning as a social and collaborative process. Students experience this through relationships with both peers and the teacher in the learning environment. Engagement theory acknowledges that positive relationships are crucial to learning (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1986; Fredricks, 2011). Stage-environment fit theory asserts that relationships must be developmentally supportive in order to be effective (Eccles et al., 1993; Hunt, 1975). The literature clearly supports the notion that social and collaborative learning experience yield greater engagement in learning (Gehlbach et al., 2012; Strong et al., 2001; Wolk, 2003). The finding from this study suggests that students are more highly engaged in learning when they see learning as a collaborative opportunity.

Third, highly engaged middle school students are able to independently draw upon study strategies that they have developed. Both engagement theory and the literature on young adolescents suggest that the learner wants to have a relationship with learning environment or task (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1986; Spires et al., 2008). Stage-environment fit suggests that the young adolescent learner is beginning to seek autonomy and greater control (Hunt, 1975); students who are able to effectively select and utilize study strategies experience greater autonomy and control over their learning. Stage-environment theory states that the stage prior to early adolescence sets a crucial foundation for the successful development of autonomy in learning (Eccles, 1999) which
suggests that implications of this finding should be considered at the elementary school level.

Fourth, highly engaged middle school students are able to overcome learning obstacles. They exhibit an understanding of the role that perseverance plays in the face of significant challenges. Stage-environment fit theory suggests that students will flourish when provided with the developmentally appropriate amount of support; this changes constantly during the young adolescent stage of development (Eccles, 1999). The literature suggests that peers can be positive role models in cases of overcoming challenges (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Additionally, the literature suggests that students want to be engaged in authentic learning experiences (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Spires et al., 2008). Beyond the current literature, this study found that students who self-identify as highly engaged in learning can describe and access perseverance in order to successfully complete an assignment or task. Unlike the supporting literature, this finding was not necessarily contingent upon support from others.

Finally, highly engaged middle school students want to succeed in the learning environment. Students consider that success can be measured by grades or teacher feedback, peer feedback, or a personal sense of accomplishment. While each of these measures of success can yield high emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), the participants in this study felt most enthusiastic when they achieved a personal sense of accomplishment. Stage-environment theory asserts the importance of the developmentally appropriate learning environment in order for a student to experience success (Eccles et al., 1993).
Because these findings so clearly connect with the theories and the literature about the American middle school, the learning environment, and the young adolescent learner, it is worth considering that these findings hold relevance for all middle school learners. Specifically, these findings can support district level consideration of how to support development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; this includes differentiation, opportunities for collaborative and social learning, and opportunities for authentic success. Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that the middle school learning environment consider ways to effectively support the development of study strategies and a deeper understanding of the relationship between perseverance and success. Perhaps the most important conclusion from this study is that each middle school student has a voice, and that voice can provide important and profound insight to the middle level educator. Therefore, the middle school educators must develop and implement opportunities for the middle school learner’s voice to be heard and considered.

To further the research that has been conducted in this study, other voices could be considered; it is likely that the disengaged middle school student, the middle school teacher, and the parent of the middle school learner all have valuable stories to share. Additionally, it would be useful to learn more about how the highly engaged middle school develops and selects study strategies to support learning. Finally, it would be worth deeper consideration of the development of perseverance in the middle school learner and how it can be effectively sustained and strengthened during a period of time that is marked by great change.
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Appendix A

Engagement Self-Report Survey

This survey will be used for students to self-identify as being engaged in learning most or all of the time, some of the time, or rarely or none of the time.

For each statement, please rate yourself on a scale of 1-5

1= Never, 2=Hardly Ever, 3=Sometimes, 4=Most of the Time, 5= All of the Time

_____ I pay attention in class.
_____ I work hard to do my best in class.
_____ When I am in class, I listen very carefully.
_____ When I am in class, I just act like I am working. (Reverse coded)
_____ I complete my homework on time.
_____ I get in trouble at school. (Reverse coded)
_____ If I can’t understand my schoolwork, I just keep doing it until I do.
_____ I feel happy to be a part of school.
_____ I enjoy learning new things.
_____ When we work on something in class, I feel discouraged. (Reverse coded)
_____ I am bored at school. (Reverse coded)
_____ Most of the things we learn in school are useless. (Reverse coded)
_____ School is one of my favorite places to be.
_____ Sometimes I get so interested in school, I don’t want to stop.
_____ When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand.
_____ I classify problems into categories before I begin to work on them.
_____ I check my schoolwork for mistakes.
Before I begin studying, I think about what I need to learn.

I work several examples of the same problem so I can understand problems better.

When I finish working a problem, I check my answers to see if they are reasonable.

Source: Fredricks (2014)
Appendix B

Interview Questions

The interview questions address cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement. They consider both the middle level learner and the middle school learning environment. These questions are narrative and descriptive in nature, the ideal type of questions for an IPA Study.

Introductory script: Thank you for being willing to participate in this study. I want to remind you that I am doing this study as part of my work at Northeastern University. It isn’t tied to your classes or my job here at Laconia Middle School. You won’t be graded for your participation.

Our interview will be recorded, and the only people who will hear the recording will be me and the transcriptionist. (The transcriptionist takes the recording and creates a written version of everything that we say). I will erase the recording when the transcription is complete. Also, I will use a pseudonym (a made up name) when I use your information in my study. If at any time you decide that you don’t want to participate in the study anymore, that is absolutely fine. There will be no penalty for ending your participation. Do you have any questions?

I am going to ask you a few questions about your experiences being a middle school student. I am hoping that you will share stories and thoughts that are relevant to the questions. You can choose to skip any questions that you don’t want to answer. Do you have any questions?

First, I will start with some questions just to warm us up.

Warm up Questions

What do you like about school?

What do you not like about school?

Now, I am going to ask you some questions about being engaged in learning.

Overarching

What do you think it means to be engaged in learning?
What do you think it means to be disengaged from learning?

Now, I will ask you some more specific questions.

**Topic 1: Emotional Engagement**

Can you tell me about a day, or part of a day, or moment during a school day that you remember as being a really great day?

Can you tell me about a time when you were particularly interested in what was going on in class?

Have you ever gotten so interested in a class or an assignment that you didn’t want to stop when it was time to move to the next class or activity?

**Topic 2: Behavioral Engagement**

Describe what it looks like when you are highly engaged in an assignment.

Can you tell me about a time when you worked your hardest on an assignment? What kept you going when the assignment got tough?

**Topic 3: Cognitive Engagement**

Can you talk about a time when you studied for a test when you felt that your studying paid off? What did you do? How do you know that it paid off?

Can you describe strategies that you use to make sure that you are understanding the material that is being taught?

*Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview. I will be in touch with you within the next few days if I need any follow up information from you. You, or your parent/guardian can contact me anytime about this interview and this study in general.*