

# Engaging Middle Years' Male Students

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*SELU Research Review Journal, 1(2), 5–15.*

# SELU Research Review Journal



volume 1  
issue 2  
2016

[selu.usask.ca](http://selu.usask.ca)

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# Engaging Middle Years' Male Students

Paul Strueby

## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to review research that was conducted on the engagement levels of students, and more specifically, middle years male students. There is a growing problem in society that males are becoming more removed from their education; this phenomenon is widely reported in educational research. This paper examines and describes data that has proven male disengagement. The following research targets four key areas to improve engagement amongst students: (1) Teacher-student interaction, (2) Curriculum relevancy, (3) Inquiry-based learning, and (4) Teacher collaboration. Ideally this paper will provide educators with general knowledge regarding how to engage middle years males and disengaged students.*

Education today is an ever-changing landscape that makes it almost impossible for educators to stay current with best practice. Trying to sift through what needs significant change can be a very daunting task. This challenge is compounded by the speed at which our society is evolving (Gilbert, 2007). Students' lives are much different than their parents. Advancements in technology have changed the way our youth think and seek out information (Gilbert, 2007). Failing to help these students learn in a new way should be considered a failure. If we fail to help our youth, we are not going to prosper as a society (Gilbert, 2007).

Our provincial government has identified a few key areas of weakness that our school divisions are working toward improving (Government of Saskatchewan, 2016). These provincial goals have been a focus of the divisions within our province, as they strive towards meeting them. A problem within Canada that our provincial education ministry has identified is student engagement (Government of Saskatchewan, 2016). If teachers are able to engage students, it improves almost all facets of education. There will be fewer class management issues and student achievement will improve, which in turn will make teachers happier (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). Happier teachers are easier to work with and are able to form stronger teacher-student-relationships. These issues are all directly tied to one another. The Canadian media has also taken a special interest in this topic in recent years. *The Globe and Mail* ran a series of in-depth articles on how our education system was failing boys (Abraham, 2010a; Abraham, 2010b). According to one of the articles, the problems begin in and around the middle years.

Data suggests that boys, as a group, rank behind girls by nearly every measure of scholastic achievement. They earn lower grades overall in elementary school and high school. They trail in reading and writing, and 30 per cent of them land in the bottom quarter of standardized tests, compared with 19 per cent of girls. Boys are also more likely to be picked out for behavioural problems, more likely to repeat a grade and to drop out of school altogether. (Abraham, 2010a, para. 6)

The article referenced specific data, but looked into the issue on a deeper level and listed a plethora of reasons of why boys tend to lag behind. This paper will focus on the following topics relevant to this examination: the power of student-teacher relationships, curriculum relevancy, inquiry-based learning, and professional development for teachers. Student engagement literature is also relevant to this topic. Taylor & Parsons (2011) alluded to the amount of research being conducted on student engagement. They discussed how there was a very rich resource base available with many different opinions. Sorting through what works for each group of students can be a daunting task.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discover ways to improve engagement levels for middle years males. According to our national *Tell Them From Me Survey* results, middle years students across Canada were not engaged in their learning (Willms, 2003). More specifically, male students tend to be less engaged. Willms (2003) also showed between grades six and nine, engagement levels drop from 60% to 30%. Furthermore, boys lagged behind in attendance, homework behaviours, interest and motivation, as well as effort. The following research questions will explore this topic more in depth.

## Research Questions

1. Why are male students, as a group, less engaged than female students in their academic program?
2. Why do male students in the middle years become less engaged?
3. What types of strategies can teachers and schools implement to improve the engagement of male middle years students?

## Method

Information for this paper was gathered from educational research published in journal articles, texts, and newspaper articles. In order to explore the four topics targeted that are associated with improved student engagement, there were a variety of sources and authors used. Most of the data gathered was qualitative, but there was a mixed use of quantitative data as well. Using more than one type of data should help draw a clear picture of what is at the heart of male disengagement in the middle years. There also were some articles that argue the other side of the spectrum. It is important to understand that there are more opinions out there. Student engagement has been a very popular topic in education, but it is imperative to note that not all of the research is perfect (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Trying to remain unbiased throughout this project was paramount.

As previously stated, this paper focused on engagement levels of middle years male students in Canada. Carrol & Beman (2015) pointed out that low engagement levels among male students is a worldwide phenomenon. However, this project focused on Canada in order to keep the paper relevant for teachers in Saskatchewan. This paper worked under the assumption that many males in Canada, at least to some degree, have issues with engagement. We know the data suggest that males are less engaged and are scoring lower in many different areas than previous generations (Abraham, 2010a). It should also be noted that Canada is a very diverse nation economically, geographically, and culturally (Evans, 2013). Engagement levels amongst males will not be the same in each school, community, or province.

Researching engagement can be a large task. This paper will explore the four aforementioned major trends discussed in much of the research on the topic of student engagement. The research used in this paper was published in a variety of different countries worldwide. Among advanced nations, male disengagement is a very pervasive problem (Carrol & Beman, 2015). It is not a challenge we are facing only in Canada (Carrol & Beman, 2015). Using a variety of research conducted in different parts of the world

should help provide many strategies teachers can use to engage their students. Seeing as Canada is such a diverse nation, the variety of research used fits perfectly.

Most studies described in this project were published in scholarly articles. Many of the researchers referenced, particularly Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009), have written extensively on student engagement. Abraham (2010a) also highlighted many of the problems our young males are facing in the classroom. Regardless of the type of publication, the authors found different ways to tie student engagement to student achievement. Many of these authors relied on quantitative data to measure student engagement, despite most authors having difficulty objectively measuring engagement levels.

## Findings

### Family Influence and Economic Change

There are many different theories as to why our young males have become disengaged in our schools. One of the most glaring issues in our province today is lack of positive family influence on education. In North America, there has been a shift in labor (Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, & Byun, 2014). According to Meece et al. (2014) there were many different factors that lead to the disengagement of young males: available jobs, traditional roles, and competitive wages were some of the main issues. In Saskatchewan, this is very true, and teachers come across these issues every day. With our province currently reaping the benefits of an economic boom, there has been plenty of opportunity for our young male adults to make a healthy living by joining the trades or entering the nonrenewable resource field (Tushabe, 2015). These jobs generated high enough wages to provide families with a strong economic base. The problem is that many of these fields did not stress the importance of a high educational standard, and there has also been a demand for unskilled workers (Tushabe, 2015). Based on that demand, students may have tended to take the minimum amount of classes, and in some cases, input the minimum amount of effort, because they knew that they could make a healthy living once they graduated.

Meece et al. (2014) discovered that most assumptions about male students' economic aspirations are true. Male students did not have the same amount of pressure to perform in education, nor did they receive the same amount of support while attending high school. Meece et al. (2014) even took it one step further and found evidence that teachers themselves had lower expectations for male students than females. The most influential people in male students' lives seemed to have the opinion that male students did not need to value education as much as their female counterparts. People in communities did not even notice the negative influence they had on male students. Without the importance of education stressed to these male students from influential role models, engagement levels have naturally digressed or remained low.

While looking into the reasons why male students were disengaged, shedding some light on the female outlook on rural education illuminated a different perspective. The idea of the "rural dull" might be a good place to start. As Rye (2006) alluded to, many young students viewed their local community as a place to leave. Many of the characteristics that attracted people to rural areas were not attractive to young female students. Also, there were not as many opportunities in the rural work force for female students. It was important that rural schools provide students with more than the skills to leave. What needed to be understood was that in order to engage young male students, schools must engage them by teaching skills that they deem necessary to stay in their community (Rye 2006). Rye stated the female population viewed post-secondary education as an important aspect in their lives. The rural education system needed to adapt accordingly to engage young males. With our large rural education population, Rye's (2006) conclusions are particularly relevant to Saskatchewan and Western Canada.

### Effective Use of Data

School leaders and school staff need to collect and analyze data to ensure that they understand student engagement and ways to improve engagement.

School leaders are no longer resident experts about their schools. Instead, they are faced with the daunting task of anticipating the future and making conscious adaptations to their practices, in order to keep up and to be responsive to an ever-changing environment. (Earl & Fullan, 2003, p. 384)

In today's world, it is almost impossible to try new things and fail without backlash from various groups such as parents, co-workers, and students themselves. When implementing change, it is important to be able to back it with research and data. This way, administration can justify decisions to whomever questions them. When staff is presented with data, it will help motivate them to implement the necessary changes to make sure the students' learning improves (Earl & Fullan, 2003).

A roadblock that administrators will need to overcome from time to time is the interpretation of data, not only for their own understanding, but also for the understanding of their staff (Scott & Usher, 1996). Some teachers may not have the skills to interpret data correctly, and it is the job of the administrator to help them understand. The data must be presented in a manner that all members understand (Scott & Usher, 1996). Once the teachers can see why the changes are being implemented, they will be on board. Change is difficult, and without a reason or evidence as to why the changes are being made, it can be challenging to implement.

### A Myth in Male Engagement Levels

With evidence mounting on every front, many researchers believe that the lack of male teachers and role models may be a problem in our schools. "It is now possible for a child in Canada to go through elementary school and high school and never see a male at the front of the class," said Jon Bradley, an associate professor of education at McGill University, where men make up just five per cent of the elementary teachers in training (Abraham, 2010b, para. 3). Abraham (2010b) explained that less than 20 percent of elementary school teachers were males, and he argued that the lack of positive male role models may have been one of the most important factors as to why our young males were not engaged. They did not see or hear males preach on a daily basis that education is important. They did not see their male counterparts immersed in an educational setting on a daily basis.

Despite all of the evidence about the importance of male teachers, Martin and Marsh (2005) found that in order to engage males in the classroom, teacher gender had no bearing in the situation whatsoever. After exploring the influence of male teachers on engagement levels of boys, they found that choice, assessment, and teacher-student relationships were the most important points. Based on this article, one could argue that there was not a negative effect of teacher gender on male students' grades. As a matter of fact, girls reported lower levels of interaction with males while the boys reported the same amount of interaction with both male and female teachers, suggesting engagement had more to do with pedagogy than the gender of the teacher (Martin & Marsh, 2005). If teachers are armed with the correct tool kit, it does not matter if they are male or female. Finding common ground may be more difficult because of societal norms, but it is possible.

### Interaction

An untapped resource that is often forgotten about is the students themselves. A simple conversation or listening to the direction students would like to take their learning can enhance the level of engagement we can reach with our students (Taylor & Parsons 2011). We must better understand these youth to determine how to best engage them in learning; however, there has been a lack of student perspective in studies of student engagement (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

To students, interaction is a very important piece to learning. Interaction can mean many different things. Interacting with one's teacher, other classmates, and even other schools are some examples of interaction. No longer are students learning on their own. According to Dunleavy & Milton (2009), teachers were learning alongside their students, helping create a level playing field and a mutual respect that promotes learning.

Dunleavy & Milton (2009) also stated:

when students were asked to reflect on their high school and elementary school experiences, they explained they learned best from the teachers with whom they shared mutual respect and the teachers who took a vested interest in them and their wellbeing. (p. 15).

Developing a respectful relationship between student and teacher is of utmost importance. As discussed earlier, students are much different than they were just a short time ago. Students are interactive and crave engagement (Dunleavy & Milton 2009). A survey conducted showed that interactions among students, both in and outside of the classroom, were crucial to developing a positive learning environment (Willms, Friesen & Milton,., 2009). Willms et al. (2009) pinpointed a few reoccurring elements to engage students. Students sought strong relationships with classmates, communities, and teachers. They were looking for their teachers to know them as individuals. They were also interested in teachers learning how to teach them as individuals. Students were looking for teachers to understand how they learn and use the information to guide their teaching. Lastly students were looking for high levels of interdependence; they wanted to rely on the people around them to be involved in their education. This, in turn, helped build a culture of learning.

These three themes were what the new-age learner was looking for, according to Willms et al. (2009). They were interested in interaction, and they wanted to be engaged with multiple individuals on what they are learning. Through strong relationships, this interdependence could be built and increase engagement levels. Students were willing to work, but educators needed to find the right strings to pull in order to motivate them. Willms et al. (2009) have proven that students want strong bonds with those involved in their education.

Dunleavy and Milton (2009) argued that students were looking to learn from resident experts in the fields in which they were studying. They were looking for local people to support their learning. Teachers no longer had to be the expert on every topic. Students craved a shared learning environment in which they work with the teacher (Dunleavy, 2009). Students wanted an atmosphere of collaboration to seek out the answers and information that they were interested.

Instead of teachers telling students what they should learn, students prefer having a choice. Finding ways to manipulate the curriculum to provide choices can be difficult, but Claxton (2007) found guiding students through the outcomes with options increased engagement. Gone are the days of telling students the answers and expecting the class to stay interested in what you are teaching.

Dunleavy and Milton (2009) dug even further into the topic. They went as far to say that as students progressed through school, their lives became much more complex and they often needed an adult to lean on. Without a strong relationship built with an adult in the school, students tended to struggle. These relationships helped students develop resiliency, self-sufficiency, and confidence (Dunleavy, 2009). Many times, the student that is struggling needs a positive role model.

In the end, student-teacher relationships are one of the keys to engaging students on a consistent basis. It has been proven that student-teacher interaction can have an effect size of .72 on a student's learning (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996). By utilizing simple relationship building techniques, teachers would be able to better engage their students without changing pedagogy or content. These relationships help build a positive classroom environment in which students are willing to learn. When students reported a higher level of enjoyment, it ultimately affected their learning in a positive manner (Dunleavy, 2009).

### **Inquiry Learning**

With an abundance of classroom engagement research published in the last few years, it became evident that inquiry-based learning had the ability to engage learners (Carroll & Beman, 2015). Carroll & Beman (2015) also explained how effective exploratory learning could be. The student of today was interested in finding solutions on their own and doing the work themselves. They just needed a guide along the way (Windham, 2005). Furthermore, male students needed high levels of challenging content



that was of great interest to them, and their learning was stronger when it was an active experience they could delve into (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002).

Students wanted to be able to immerse themselves in their learning. They were not interested in reading through a text book, because they knew there were better options out there. They understood that there were multiple facets in which one can learn, and mulling through a text book day after day did not excite students on a consistent basis (Windham, 2005).

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) developed an idea they dubbed “Understanding by Design” (UBD). UBD is an idea linked to the Inquiry process. Inquiry can be somewhat complicated, but with a simple approach like UBD, you can capture learners at the very early stages. With Understanding by Design, you begin with the end in mind. Students were allowed to decide what they would like to learn and how to learn it. If the teacher guided this correctly and kept the student aligned with the outcome, this was an efficient process. If students had a vision of what the end product was supposed to look like before they began, they tended to be more engaged. Allowing students to choose the end product increased engagement even more (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Carrol and Beman (2015) listed many challenges with UBD. They stated that learning using this process, generally had a longer timeframe, it was more difficult to manage, differentiation was difficult, and there was possibility for controversial topics to arise. However, with all of these added challenges, the levels of engagement and learning were too high to overlook. The use of authentic practice was a powerful tool, and in the end, male students benefited from the hard work of teachers (Carrol & Beman, 2015).

Despite the research in support of inquiry learning and Understanding by Design, these strategies were not a cure all for the disengagement of male students. Disengagement is a complex phenomenon. There are many different factors that may cause disengagement that over which the teacher does not have control. This is where student-teacher relationships come into play. Before any planning begins, one must ask, “What are my students’ views on learning?” (Deed & Campbell, 2007). Deed and Campbell (2007) admittedly used a small snapshot, but they posed a good point. They proposed that Inquiry Learning was an effective way to engage students (particularly males), but the teacher had to be armed with other tools of engagement. Inquiry alone was not necessarily the most effective strategy to increase engagement.

## Curriculum Relevancy

Curriculum relevancy has become an issue at the forefront of education. With high quality jobs available for students with low high school educational standing, teachers needed to find a way to make sure students’ learning was not considered something that they had to get through and finish (Meece, et al. 2014). If teachers were supplied with the skills to successfully apply a flexible curriculum which met local standards, student success rates increased. Stelmach (2011) stated that, even without support for education from the home, adapting a philosophy that allowed local expertise to become a part of your everyday learning fostered student development and appreciation for the local surroundings. If teachers have skills to properly carry out an inquiry lesson, the ability to tweak and twist the curriculum without straying too far from its core values should not be difficult.

Now, more than ever, students are looking for reasons to link their school work to real life scenarios. Students were looking to work on community issues or events that had an impact on their lives and those surrounding them (Claxton, 2007). Researchers have also found value in linking student work to possible careers (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos, & Rose, 2013). Teachers may find it insignificant to have a middle years student choose a career, but if students felt that it would influence their future in a positive way, they were more likely to put forth a strong effort (Orthner et al., 2013). Perry (2008) found that students who were able to connect their education to their future goals were likely to perform at a higher level in school.

One of the problems though, that fooled many teachers was the short term learning that took place. Short term learning could be misleading to teachers. It appeared that real learning had occurred, when

in fact teachers should have been attempting to achieve the long term learning that has deep understanding (Orthner et al., 2013).

Due to the pressures on teachers to link assignments with the “real world,” finding ways to make this happen will help engage the male student. If our male students knew that they were entering the workforce once they left school, engaging them in a work scenario may have helped engage them. Willms, Friesen, & Milton (2009) explained the importance of linking the students’ work to real world scenarios. This approach is where tapping into the local expertise is crucial. The saying, “it takes a village to raise a child” can be applied in this situation.

Claxton (2007) took a deeper look and recommended that students have full control over their work. To maximize learning, students’ were able to control what they were working on, why they were doing it, and where they found their information. Finally, he suggested that their findings had to matter to someone. They had to make a difference in a real life scenario.

**Benefits of collaboration.** Collaboration potentially can benefit the school, the teachers, and the students. Although most benefits are teacher related, the school and students do see benefit in collaboration (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015.). There are many known advantages to collaboration amongst teachers. In their study, Vangrieken et al. (2015) reported, “[t]eachers were reported to be more motivated, to experience decreased workload, a positive impact on teacher morale, greater efficiency, increased communication, improved technological skills, reduced personal isolation” (p. 27). Most literature supports positive outcomes from teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. also indicated in their study that there was improved student understanding which increased the student learning. Perez (2015) also agreed in this improvement stating that junior high schools in Ohio had twenty percent increases in math due to extensive teacher collaboration. In regards to teachers, Vangrieken et al. stated that when their practice improved, the student learning and performance also showed growth. “Increased effective collaboration exposes teachers to improved practices which leads to stronger pedagogy” (Perez, 2015, para. 11) At the school level, there was a more positive school climate, more attention to student needs, and a more professional culture around intellectual inquiry. Perez (2015) also noted that when a collaborative culture in a school has been created, it “will result in reducing teacher attrition, improving student learning, and creating the type of school that everyone searches for when they decide to become an educator” (para. 12). This type of collaborative culture benefits the teachers, the school and the students. Collaboration between schools has a positive impact. There is “an enormous potential for fostering system-wide improvements” (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011, p. 133). When collaborative activities are relatively easy to implement, there is a direct impact on achievement. The simple act of sharing resources is invaluable to teachers and an important part of collaboration (Muijs et al., 2011, p. 135).

### Possible Negative Aspects of Collaboration

Collaboration amongst teachers cannot be forced. It is not always appreciated or successful (Vangrieken et al., 2015). “Teacher collaboration is not a panacea that solves all problems” (Vangrieken, et al., 2015, p. 29). Within collaboration, there may be conflict, a push to conforming may occur, groupthink mentality is possible, and there could be loss of autonomy.

Tension and competitiveness are also possibilities when collaboration occurs (Vangrieken et al., 2015). In order to have success, all members need to put in adequate amounts of effort. If it is not quality collaboration, power struggles and frustration can occur (Perez, 2015). Groups that work together, need to have shared commitments and common goals. They need to build trust so that there is support amongst the group. Without a sense of trust, collaboration will not be successful. While collaboration requires trust, it also builds trust (Katz, Earl, & Ben Jafaar, 2009). Trusting relationships are an important component for working and reflecting with others (Aporia Report, 2006). Without it, true collaboration will not occur. Benefits of collaboration potentially can increase achievement in the school for the teachers, and the students. Although most benefits are teacher related, the school and students do see benefit in collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaboration can add a number of advantages for teachers. In their study, Vangrieken et al. (2015) found that teachers listed a number of aspects that improved their job, such as motivation, decreased workload, teacher morale increased, and reduced

personal isolation. Most literature supports positive outcomes from teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. stated in their work that students understood more as well as achievement increased. Perez (2015) also found evidence to support this, he found large improvements in junior high schools in Ohio, up to a 20 percent increase in certain subjects, all because of positive teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. stated that when their practice improved, the student learning and performance also showed growth. At the school level, there was a more positive school climate, more attention to student needs, and a more professional culture around intellectual inquiry. If teachers have the chance to collaborate and share what works for them student engagement will increase. Gone are the days of a teacher closing their door behind them after the first bell. Perez (2015) also noted that when a collaborative culture in a school has been created, it helps improve such things as teacher attrition, student learning, and creating a positive atmosphere for new teachers to work in. This type of collaborative culture benefits the teachers, the school and the students.

**Collaboration.** Benefits of collaboration can potentially increase achievement in the school for teachers and students. Although most benefits were teacher-related, the school and students did see benefit in collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaboration can add a number of advantages for teachers. In their study, Vangrieken et al. (2015) found that teachers listed a number of ways collaboration improved their job, such as increased motivation, decreased workload, improved teacher morale, and reduced personal isolation. Most literature supported positive outcomes from teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. also stated in their work that students understood outcomes better and achievement increased. Perez (2015) found evidence to support this research. He found large improvements in middle years grade schools in Ohio, and he noted up to 20 percent increase in certain subjects, because of positive teacher collaboration. Vangrieken et al. stated that when collaborative practice improved, student learning and performance also showed growth. At the school level, there was a more positive school climate, more attention to school needs, and a more professional culture around intellectual inquiry. If teachers had the chance to collaborate and share what worked for them, student engagement increased. Perez noted that when a collaborative culture in a school had been created, it helped improve such things as teacher attrition, student learning, and creating a positive atmosphere in which students could learn. This type of collaborative culture benefitted the teachers, the school, and students.

Collaboration among teachers has been shown to have a positive impact. The potential for massive school-wide improvement was achievable for to all schools that are willing to make a change (Muijs et al., 2011). When collaborative activities were relatively easy to implement, there was a direct impact on achievement and engagement. Having teachers share their successes regarding increased student engagement helped foster an atmosphere within in a school where it became the social norm for students to be engaged in their learning. The sharing of resources was one of the most valuable parts of collaboration, but teachers needed to break down barriers and be willing to share (Muijs et al., 2011).

There are, however, some negative aspects of collaboration, according to the literature. Teachers were not going to be forced into the situation. Administrators needed to be creative in motivating teachers to take part in professional development on their own (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Within our schools, tension and competitiveness, individual agendas, and lack of teamwork were potential barriers to collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2015). In order for teachers to have success collaborating, there had to be a specific plan put in place. Placing teachers in a room did not mean that successful collaboration took place. There needed to be a certain level of accountability. If it was not quality collaboration, power struggles and frustration tended to occur (Perez, 2015). Within the collaborative groups, there needed to be common goals and a level of trust. Trust was key to high levels of collaboration (Katz et al., 2009). Trusting relationships were an important component for working and reflecting with others (Earl, Katz, Elgie, Ben Jaafar, & Foster, 2006). Without it, true collaboration did not occur.

### Implications for Research

There is a need for more research for engaging young males. Continued research on curriculum relevancy is needed. The development of programs to mold the curriculum to local needs will be a difficult

task. Simple problems such as, training teachers, remaining current with the local trends, and making it fit within the school's needs could be difficult to accomplish.

Engaging boys by having them delve into their futures is an interesting process. There needs to be more exploration on this topic. Watching student's grades slowly slip as they begin to believe that most of the information they learn in school is not relevant to their future can be frustrating. Having students take an interest in their future and link it to their learning would be a great motivator. If there would be more research in this area, teachers could use a few simple strategies to link the two and engage male learners at a higher level.

## Implications for Practice

Engaging the middle years male can be a constant battle. Students come to school with all different kinds of backgrounds and world views. Students already have their beliefs and morals firmly entrenched before they appear in the middle years setting. Quite frankly, finding ways to engage males has a lot to do with relevancy. Many young males do not see the importance of their education, so educators need to connect their learning to what they feel is important. If they understand that what they are completing in school will have significance in their life, they will be engaged and reach higher levels of satisfaction in their work.

Furthermore, teacher-student relationships can be one of the most important keys to engaging male students. Relating to your students on a daily basis will help them become more engaged in their work. Forming a relationship that shows that teachers have a level of vulnerability and that they do not know everything helped develop an atmosphere of learning (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009). These relationships can help a teacher provide constant feedback in a manner where the student is more willing to accept what is being taught. As Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie (1996) pointed out, feedback had a very large effect size, and being able to deliver that feedback in an effective timely manner was important. These student-teacher relationships fostered this behaviour.

Inquiry-based learning should never be overlooked. Some people argue that it is a trend, but the proof of its effectiveness is strong. We cannot deny that students are much different than they used to be, so why would we continue to teach the same way? The freedom of choice in education is a powerful tool that is empowering our students by allowing them to find relevance in their learning.

When researching male engagement, the most common topic that I came across was curriculum relevancy. Allowing male students to make choices to work hands-on was more effective for them, compared to their female counterparts. Whether this is a biological phenomenon or influenced by society is uncertain, but what educators need to know is that research demonstrates the difference. In order to engage males at a higher level, teachers need to find ways to link their learning to the "real world" (Claxton, 2007).

Collaboration is one of the most integral parts to supporting staff and helping them learn skills to engage students. Professional development can have its problems, but it was also proven that it made a large difference to student engagement (Vangrieke et al, 2015). Deliberate, targeted professional development on collaboration will be beneficial for teachers and have a positive impact on the students.

## Conclusion

Engaging middle years students can seem like an insurmountable task. It is unrealistic for a teacher to think that every teaching lesson will fully engage *all* of their students. Curriculum relevancy, student teacher-relationships, inquiry-based teaching, and collaboration are a group of the main tools that research is currently finding effective in terms of increasing engagement. When actively trying to target the engagement levels of a specific demographic, it is difficult to accomplish without possibly leaving other demographics behind. In the end, using explicit engagement strategies should engage both males

and females. Attempting to engage male students is something our society is focusing on, but I am not sure that is the problem. Trying to narrow the gap by targeting males, specifically, would be a mistake. It is important to deliver an adequate and equal opportunity education for all of our students.

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