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**“Want More Student Participation??... Bring on the Engagement!!”**

Armando Palmerin

California State University, Monterey Bay

LS 400-01: Senior Capstone

Dr. Patty Whang

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**Abstract**

Student engagement in the classroom is vital to academic achievement across all grade levels. This is especially true during middle school, where in-class participation can have a positive impact on emotional and cognitive development. Due to COVID-19 and school closures, students were forced to attend class virtually which had a negative impact on class engagement. Therefore this Capstone project focuses on how middle school teachers are keeping their students engaged during distance learning. This is an important issue that needs to be addressed because if students are not participating in their synchronous class meetings then they are not learning. It is argued that students' participation and engagement in class are essential to reduce the sense of isolation they may be having. Being engaged in their classes also maintains their desire to learn and still be academically successful. Four middle school teachers were interviewed for this study. After analyzing the data collected, three themes emerged and a combination of two was used to address the issue of virtual student engagement. As a result, an action option was developed which would be the most effective way to improve student engagement in the classroom during virtual instruction and can also be used in the classroom when students return to in-person school.

*Keywords:* Student engagement, middle school, distance learning

**“Want More Student Participation??... Bring on the Engagement!!”**

When the coronavirus hit the United States and its smaller communities, it quickly began changing the lives of everyone. Within the realm of education, schools began closing their doors forcing teachers and students to do schooling from their own homes. Everything switched to an online format creating a lot of stress for teachers to teach daily with no preparedness. The whole idea of student engagement in the classroom was another big thing that was new to distance learning. Relationship building from teachers to students has been difficult due to the decrease of participation in in-class discussions. The amount of stress teachers have been put through has impacted their motivation and how effective their teaching may be through a computer screen. Additionally, professional development workshops for teachers have decreased which has impacted the amount of resources and methods they can use in their virtual classroom to keep their students engaged. We are now over one year into the pandemic and the school district where I live still has 100% of its students learning in a virtual setting.

Within my community, there have been recreation programs that have connected with schools before and allowed students to attend after-school to receive homework help or participate in different activities. At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, AMIGOS, the program I work with, implemented a program where families can sign up their middle school children to receive extra help while they are in class. With a small cohort of twelve students, who are at different grade levels (6th-8th) and attend different schools, I have noticed how unlike the teachers are in trying to engage their students. There are about 10 different teachers who have caught my attention with their methods of implementing student engagement, but I will only focus on two of them and one principal.

Javier is a seventh-grade student and has Ms. Hunter for his Science class. Ms. Hunter

has a lot of student participation every time her class meets. Javier usually has a hard time understanding some of the science concepts but when he has a question he is not afraid to ask. Like most of his classmates, his camera is always on and engaged with the lesson she is teaching that day. Every two weeks, Ms. Hunter also breaks up the class into smaller breakout rooms to solve a puzzle related to that day's lesson. The students, including Javier, are 100% engaged and try their hardest regardless of how difficult it may be.

Ms. Fraser teaches 8th-grade History and Tony, a student in her class, has to be reminded multiple times to pay attention in class. Her way of teaching is very unique, due to the circumstances we are in right now. Most of the time Ms. Fraser has her camera turned off and is usually reading from the class textbook, highlighting key points and important words. The rest of the students always have their cameras turned off with a lack of student engagement. I think this is what is causing Tony to be distracted. He finds reading the book boring and is not communicating with his peers which results in him being distracted.

Now at the administrative level, a principal, Mr. Manriquez implemented a house system this school year at his middle school. Students are placed in one of the four houses and then gain points for the house they are in. Students can earn these points by completing their classwork, helping others in the class, being responsible, etc. Jesus, a seventh-grade student at this middle school, always looks forward to Friday morning because teachers from each house compete in a "Battle of the Houses" trivia game. Students also have the opportunity to gain points in each class which is then added to their specific houses' total score. From my point of view, it looks like this method has boosted student participation because the students are all looking forward to gaining something for their house and taking pride in something they contributed to.

Overall, classroom engagement in middle school seems to be quite important for

academic success. There are different factors that impact what teachers do to improve this type of engagement. The result of school closures has tremendously impacted teachers and students within their classrooms. Both teachers and students are at different levels in a school setting, however, both parties need to put in the most of their part to have a smooth outcome in their online classes.

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

Olivier et al. (2021) define student engagement as, “ [their] involvement in their learning activities and typically encompasses the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions” (p. 2). Students, especially those in middle school, need continuous motivation and engagement in their classrooms. With their in-class participation, student’s behavior, emotional and cognitive development can be positively impacted during their time in middle school (Olivier et al., 2021, p.2). Therefore that engagement in the classroom needs to be best represented by building complex learning experiences for students, having peer interactions and students receiving support from their teacher when they are struggling with a certain topic in class (Gensel & Pascopella, 2017). When COVID-19 forced school buildings to close and turn education into a distance learning format, many issues escalated within the school. For now, virtual instruction is what is being used to move forward to teach and learn from. However, educators need to “ focus on preserving the “high impact educational practices” that promote deep student engagement with their learning” ( Reynolds et al., 2020, p. 12573). Keeping those high standards can be maintained by teachers building teacher-student relationships, and having proper collaborative meetings with their colleagues. Engagement in the classroom seems to be easy to develop but can be challenging to maintain at the middle school level. As we move forward with the issues brought upon us with the pandemic, we have to ensure students are still receiving the education

they deserve.

### **What is the Problem?**

Students who are not engaged in their classes tend to not pay attention to what they are being taught and it also impacts their academic success in a negative way compared to those engaged students (Finn et al., 1995). Also, without an engaging environment, disengaged students “are more likely to disrupt class, less likely to accept challenges, have lower grades, and aren’t confident in their ability to learn” (Bell, 2019). Researcher Lee (2013), discovered, “student engagement at school was a significant predictor of academic performance” (p.18). Now, due to COVID-19 and school building closures, student engagement during virtual learning has dropped immensely (Domina et al., 2021). For those students in the middle grades, Yoder (2020) discovered that “middle-schoolers may be particularly vulnerable to learning loss” (para 18), with the school shutdowns back in March of 2020. Students' learning gains will drop significantly compared to other school years. A study was conducted and researchers found that when students returned back to school in August of 2020 (the start of the school year), their learning gains in reading would be in the range of 63-68%, and 37-50% of learning gains in math (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). This percentage indicates the amount of learning that was gained by the students compared to a regular school year. Due to the pandemic, these percentages resulted from online learning. Since the school closures have gone into effect through over half of the 2020-2021 school year, those percentages are most likely to decrease even more showcasing how much learning loss students experienced during distance learning in this pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). With these incoming results, it will be crucial for teachers to implement unique ways of virtual instruction so their students can be engaged and learn.

Teachers are having an extremely difficult time figuring out how to properly teach

lessons, and like their students, they too are struggling with low morale (Will, 2021). With the several barriers that all school personnel have faced, it is crucial to remember that students' learning and engagement is “essential to reduce their sense of isolation and maintain their desire to learn, their satisfaction, and their academic achievement” (Abou et al., 2021, p. 1).

### **Why is it an Issue?**

Virtual learning has taken a toll on teachers' and students' lives over the past year. As we look back to physical in-person teaching/learning, having an engaging class is what leads to students having great academic performance (Roorda, 2011, p. 494). To improve student engagement, “having positive relationships between teachers and their students, as opposed to negative ones, are advantageous to student success” (Ramirez, 2019, p.6). Since everything has been switched to an online format, teachers cannot adequately build these relationships with their students. It can be done through virtual class meetings but it is not the same as if class was in-person. These relationships are what brings teaching to life and are what makes the profession so rewarding. As Spilt et al, (2011), discovered “teacher-student relationships are often mentioned as one of the core reasons for staying in the profession” (p. 460). These relationships are an important factor during distance learning because they are one way to have an engaging classroom environment.

A second disadvantage of low student engagement during distance learning is that teachers are not seeing an effective outcome with students' learning. Morin (2020) identified accessibility, structure, stress/trauma, and the way teachers engage their students as being the top reasons as to why students are not learning from their teachers (para 2). In fact, students are not retaining information because their teachers are not motivated to teach due to the challenging circumstances they have to work with and unfortunately leading to teacher burnout. Panisoara et



al. (2020) identified that there are “multiple factors that can lead to teacher burnout, such as low levels of social interaction, which are self-evident within the current pandemic context” (p.8).

The decrease of motivation in teachers is present in this situation because of the different ways they have to switch their teaching methods to an online setting. A group of researchers found that “students tend to become more intrinsically motivated when they experience the satisfaction of the psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in a learning task...”

(Zoccoletti et al., 2020, p. 3). When students begin to lose motivation with their school work, those three factors are also impacted and may disrupt the students’ in-class participation.

The last significant disadvantage to low student engagement is not under the teacher's or the student's control. The local school district is also responsible for providing fitting professional development (PD’s) opportunities for their educators across all schools. If districts do not offer their teachers these structured workshops the students are impacted as well. When teachers attend these facilitated meetings, they “can lead to successful changes in teachers’ practice, school improvement and improvements in pupils’ achievement” (Opfer & Pedder, 2010). It can be difficult for educators to teach and attend these PD’s, however, when they take what they learn at those meetings, it will ensure that they teach effectively and increase their student engagement during their virtual class meetings (Institute, 2020, para. 3).

### **What Can Be Done?**

There are a variety of efforts that can be accomplished to improve student engagement at the middle school level during virtual instruction. The first action that can be taken is to ensure teachers are building positive relationships with their students. Roorda et al. (2011) discovered that the influence of positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom makes a positive impact on students' engagement. Although it may be difficult to build rapport through a

synchronous virtual meeting, creating a comfortable class community may be all that is needed for the relationships to be created. In the study mentioned above, the group of researchers found that “ if children’s basic needs are met, their engagement level in learning activities will increase (Roorda et al., 2011, p 495). Teachers caring for their students, providing in-class structure, and supporting autonomy were the basic needs the researchers were referring to. Seligman (2011), developed a theory known as the PERMA model. This model aids students in providing them with extra resources during these difficult times that they are going through. All of the mental health challenges that students may be dealing with can all be helped by teachers increasing PERMA in their classrooms. This model has five core components that can be suited in a classroom. The five elements are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments. These elements are an important part of increasing engagement in the classroom because when each student realizes that their emotions, strengths, positive interactions, and growth mindset are involved in the classroom there will be more communication between the students and their peers and the teacher with their students. If students continue to be reminded about this unique model, the engagement factor in the classroom will be seen moving forward throughout the school year. Chu (2020) outlines how these aspects within the PERMA model help teachers to teach the whole child. Chu (2020) description of each component is as follows:

Within education, positive emotions are important for broadening and building student perception of resources to deal with challenging academic tasks and daily life (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Fredrickson, 2001). Engagement allows for the implementation of strengths and skills to meet any tasks and challenges, such as learning difficult academic content (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Relationships in

a classroom with adequate quantity and quality of positive interactions, from instructor-to-student to student-to-student, can facilitate positive learning outcomes (Gable, Impett, Reis, & Asher, 2004). Meaning includes serving and doing something larger than oneself; for instance, students can learn the value of perseverance and resilience during adversity and apply their strengths to live a purposeful life (Brunzell et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2009). Accomplishments perceived by students can remind them about their potential to grow and succeed even when they have struggles in school and life (Brunzell et al., 2016). (p. 2)

Each element targets a specific part of an individual's well-being, which can allow students to realize that teachers are making the effort to build those connections with them to help them succeed.

Another effort that can be improved within schools is having proper teacher collaboration through a virtual format. Collaborative practices amongst teachers in a middle school setting can be seen when teachers from the same grade level and/or focused discipline (e.g. science, math, language arts) come together and discuss the positives and negatives that have happened in their classroom when teaching. Seghal et al. (2017) conducted a study where they discovered that “multi-disciplinary collaboration of secondary school teachers created changes in teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their work” (p. 506). As teachers get together and discuss, they can provide and receive advice so they can better improve their quality of teaching. Taking suggestions from their colleagues at these collaborative meetings can lead to students' success, as Seghal et al. (2017) emphasized, “that teachers' collaboration and networking helps in improving the academic performance of the students” (p.506).

## **Conclusion**

Many key factors bring engagement to the classroom. Both teachers and school personnel need to see the importance of keeping that student engagement during distance learning. For instance, Russo (2021), stated:

It starts with the word engage. Engaging all students in learning experiences. That has probably been the keyword that we have heard this year. And one that brings challenges that teachers face is engaging students in a distance learning environment that we have been in. (PVUSD, 2021, 5:32)

Keeping that engagement visible, from the time class begins to the end, can be the motivator to students' participation. If teachers see their students participate, they will hopefully be motivated to try new methods of teaching. Through the challenges that teachers have faced and the trauma children have experienced, due to the lack of face-to-face communication, we can see that an engaging class environment that teachers create can lead to students not having low morale as learners during this pandemic.

### **Method<sup>1</sup>**

For this research project, the researcher conducted multiple interviews to determine how middle school teachers engage their students during virtual instruction and what they think could be done to improve it. During the middle school years, children can have a difficult time adjusting to several changes in their lives. Therefore, when they attend engaging classes, their mindset is shifted to focus on in-class participation rather than focusing on non-school-related topics. It is important for teachers to keep their motivation at a high standard during synchronous live instruction so participation can be seen from the students who are on the other side of the

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all proper names.

screen. With our current situation, teachers should be able to effectively teach their students virtually so they can return to in-person instruction with the proper knowledge they learned in their classes. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher formulated an action that responds to the improvement of virtual engagement in the classroom in a way that informs the particular audience.

### **Context**

This research took place at Jefferson Middle School located in the middle-south zone of Santa Cruz county. Jefferson Middle School is a Title 1 public school and is part of the largest school district in the county. This school district has 33 schools and educates roughly 20,000 students from transitional kinder through twelfth grade. Jefferson Middle School is located in the middle of a low-income community, not far from agriculture fields, and at walking distance from downtown. Jefferson Middle School is across the street from an elementary school and half a mile away from another elementary school. This allows fifth-grade students from those two elementary schools to easily transition onto Jefferson Middle School for sixth grade. This middle school has a decent size main building consisting of about 20 indoor rooms (offices, classrooms, staff room, library, computer labs) and about 15 more outdoor portables. They have two gyms, one multipurpose room, a running track, and a large sports field. The multipurpose room is used alongside another private charter school that does not belong with the school district but under state law, the district is required to allow them to use that space if the charter school requests it. Jefferson Middle School educates over 600 students in sixth through eighth grade with about 200 students in each grade level. According to the school's 2019-2020 accountability report card of the school, there was a Hispanic/Latino student enrollment of 97.5% and 48.8% of the student

body population were English Language Learners. The average class size is 26 students and all classes have students from the same grade level (SarcOnline.org).

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

I invited four teachers from Jefferson Middle School to participate in this research study. One seventh/eighth-grade teacher has taught at the school for ten years. One seventh-grade teacher has taught middle school for six years. One-sixth/seventh-grade teacher has taught middle school for two years and a first-year teacher who teaches sixth grade. These four individuals have different middle school experiences which are relevant to my study.

#### ***Participants***

**John Stevenson.** John is a veteran teacher. He has been teaching for 16 years in this school district at three different middle schools. For ten of those years, he has been an educator at Jefferson Middle School. Mr. Stevenson has taught all three grade levels but currently is teaching both seventh and eighth-grade English Language Arts. He has a single subject credential in English and does not plan on leaving the profession of teaching anytime soon. He sees the struggles of English language learners trying to develop a new language and has a passion for improving their language development when they are in his class. He has been the English Language Development teacher for the time he has been at Jefferson Middle.

**Lucy Rodriguez.** Lucy does not consider herself a veteran teacher even though she has been in the profession for over six years. Her position has not been consistent throughout her time at Jefferson Middle School. Currently, she teaches language arts and history at the seventh-grade level but for the past four years, she has taught either one or both of these subjects

to all three grade levels. Even though Ms. Rodriguez's position is not stable from year to year, she manages to create engaging activities from different curriculums every year.

**Noel Garcia.** Noel began teaching at Jefferson Middle School two years ago. Before that, he was a fourth-grade teacher in another city and was also a soccer coach for a local nonprofit organization. He received his multiple subject teaching credential from San Jose State and has been teaching seventh-grade math and science these past two years. Mr. Garcia looks forward to teaching middle school students for a long time. After his tenure as a teacher, he has plans to move into the administration field. Mr. Garcia comes from a Hispanic household and has similar stories with his students as to how he was raised in this small town.

**Delia Gonzalez.** Delia is a first-year, sixth-grade science teacher. She got her science teaching credential from Sacramento State and decided to come back to her hometown and teach in the same district she attended when she was younger. New to the teaching career, and facing multiple challenges in her first year of teaching, Miss. Gonzalez is using her tech-savvy knowledge to help her power through distance learning. Even though it is her first year, she looks forward to staying in the profession as a middle school teacher and eventually transition to be a high school teacher.

**Researcher.** Student engagement is important to me because when I was in middle school, I had very few teachers who kept the class engaged throughout the school year. Especially now that school is being done remotely, I can see how difficult it may be for middle school students to find the motivation to stay engaged with their classes. I believe that middle school students need more direct communication in the classroom so they can become successful with their academics.

When the pandemic hit, it disrupted schools in multiple ways including teaching methods that teachers were already comfortable using within their classrooms. With the quick turnaround to virtual learning, teachers had to quickly make changes to their instruction and find ways to teach and engage their students from one side of the computer screen. Before the school closures in March of 2020, I was a service learner student in two middle school classrooms and it was interesting to see how both teachers engaged their students. Now, I am employed in a program where a small cohort of middle school students come daily and attend their virtual class meetings at this site. I am there to help with their assignments and any other help they need to better their learning. I can also see firsthand, from the student's point of view, how multiple teachers are teaching through a camera. Back in August, when the school year began, teachers were trying new ways to increase engagement. Now, eight months later, some students are still trying their hardest to stay focused and slowly get burnt out of staring in front of a screen five hours a day. Other students do not mind because they are engaged. This engagement and participation comes from teachers using different resources to pull the student's attention. It works for some but not for all. Keeping the engagement standard at a high level will ensure students are learning in the best way possible.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

1. What do you know about the importance of student engagement at the middle school level?
2. What do you see are the challenges with student engagement due to distance learning?
3. What is currently being done to address the issue of low student engagement - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
4. What do you think should be done to increase student engagement during distance



learning?

5. What are some of the challenges that teachers face when trying to find alternate ways to motivate and engage students when teaching them remotely?

6. As a teacher, how do you usually try to engage students at the beginning of the school year?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to say about students' engagement during distance learning or how it can be improved?

### **Procedure**

All four participants were interviewed individually. Interviews were conducted through a Zoom video call throughout two weeks, due to the teachers having a busy schedule. All interviewees answered seven questions and each was transcribed into a document. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes to an hour, depending on how in-depth their responses were. If any interview response needed clarification, I reached out through email for a response.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, four middle school teachers, who have different teaching experiences, were interviewed to obtain their input on student engagement and how it can be improved during virtual synchronous instruction. This is important because middle school students learn best when they are engaged with their classmates and by their teachers. Based on

an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time required, reach, and effectiveness. Time required measures the amount of time teachers will need to use to implement or be part of each Action Option. Reach determines the number of students that will be impacted by each Action Option. The final criterion that will be used is effectiveness. Effectiveness measures how effective each Action Option is towards the students. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Time Required	Reach	Effectiveness
Continuous Implementation of Growth Mindset activities	Medium	High	High
Teacher collaboration	Low	Medium	Medium
Building student-teacher relationships	Medium	Medium	High

**Growth Mindset Activities**

Students, regardless of their grade level, are always capable of learning new concepts even if they encounter challenges along the way. These challenges come as great benefits because they gain new knowledge after they have overcome that specific challenge. Therefore, they will know how to face similar obstacles in the future. That is the one way a growth mindset

works. Through practice and perseverance, it can get done. When teachers begin teaching at Jefferson Middle School they receive a growth mindset curriculum, or “toolkit” as Ms. Rodriguez calls it, with their specific subject curriculum. All four of the interviewee teachers have been using this curriculum since their arrival at Jefferson, but Mr. Stevenson and Ms. Rodriguez have had more experience with it in the classroom. In Ms. Rodriguez’ classroom she tries to implement a growth mindset activity at least once a week in all of her class periods, “it’s a great reminder for them to keep their head up when they make mistakes ... I also do growth mindset quick takes before every big lesson, or team activity to boost their confidence and to keep them engaged”, she stated (L. Rodriguez, personal communication, March 25, 2021). Her methods of implementing these growth mindset activities into her classes can help with the engagement coming from her students. Since they still continue in a virtual synchronous class format her implementation of these activities is not forgotten but it has been altered to the online modality. Similar to Ms. Rodriguez, Mr. Stevenson also pushes this curriculum to his ELD students as he states:

These kids are in my class because they need help developing their second language of English. They are the most engaged with my projects when I bring out the growth mindset sheets. Even now that we are online these kids are sharing more and more about their mindset. Although some of the growth mindset activities may be repetitive every year, it helps them reflect on their way of learning new concepts that they might find to be difficult. It truly is incredible to see them build more confidence within themselves to try harder with their language skills... (J. Stevenson, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

It is likely that many other teachers at Jefferson Middle School tie in growth mindset activities into their classes but being consistent with it is how engagement will be seen. The involvement of the four key factors of student engagement that Jackson & Allison (2014) developed, will motivate students to continue working hard. Providing clarity and plenty of context with their assignments, teachers investing their interest in students' learning, and students following through even if they make mistakes can help them stay engaged while they are in their synchronous class meetings (Jackson & Allison, 2014).

This option is set to have a medium amount of time required for implementation because a time constraint of two hours a week, at most, is what is needed to keep this curriculum embedded into their classes throughout the school year. By teaching at least one growth mindset lesson a week it will reach a high percentage of students that are in their classes. Through the consistent reminder of teaching these lessons, the effectiveness will be high because they can use what they learned about having a growth mindset and reflect on it when they are in class doing subject-based work.

### **Teacher Collaboration**

These meetings can be seen at all schools and is an effective way for teachers to stay on track with their subject curriculum. Teacher collaboration at Jefferson Middle School recurs every Wednesday afternoon when students are done for the school day. Teachers from the same grade level and subject get together and discuss important information, extra resources, positives and negatives that have been happening in the classroom, etc. Now that collaboration days are virtual it has been more effective for teachers to get together. Through the interviews I conducted, three of the teachers felt these virtual meetings are more effective than being in person. Mr. Garcia stated, “ we can call in Mr. Chapman [school principal] for any question that

we have and he will be in there in a matter of minutes”, (N. Garcia, personal communication, April 6, 2021).

Alongside these meetings being beneficial due to them being virtual, teachers can also share quick resources with their colleagues. What they share helps their students in multiple ways. They can take part in conversations about how engagement in their classrooms is seen or how it can be improved. For example, Ms. Rodriguez, who has not had a stable teaching position during her time at Jefferson, receives multiple resources from her ELA colleagues. In our interview she commented, “ ... and because we are virtual, the other language arts seventh-grade teacher has shared a drive folder with resources with me and that has helped me tremendously...” (L. Rodriguez, personal communication, March 25, 2021). Similarly, Miss. Gonzalez, who just started this year as a virtual teacher feels lucky to have great colleagues who also share science material with her for her students. Those include resources such as labs, simulations, and videos. In which she shared with me “ ... they are a big asset to my classes” (D. Gonzalez, personal communication, April 7, 2021). When teachers collaborate and take part in sharing resources, they get to see how their students get engaged with the different material that is presented to them. Past research has shown that these collaborations are a crucial part of a teacher’s routine and in the collaborative effort their students’ academic performance is set to improve (Seghal, 2017).

For these collaboration meetings, the time required is set to be low because teachers only meet once a week, typically on minimum school days when students are done early for the day. The discussions at these meetings usually pertain to focusing on the overall topics of each subject and if teachers are consistent with what they are teaching. Therefore, the reach is at a medium because even though teachers are communicating about their classes in general, they

might not include how their students work best in each class. Consequently, collaboration is highly effective because input from different teachers will ensure success in their student's work.

### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

Maintaining a positive classroom community makes a big impact on how students perform in class. With this virtual schooling format, that engaging community cannot feel the same because everything is being done through a screen. The synchronous class meetings are not even close to the normalcy students have experienced before school closures. During my interviews, all four teachers mentioned that building those relationships to maintain an engaging class with their students has been difficult but it was possible. Especially for Miss. Gonzalez, her first couple of months were all over the place. She had students logging off and joining the meeting repeatedly, cameras were off and nobody would participate, and many of her students were not doing her work (D. Gonzalez, personal communication, April 7, 2021). After she met with Mr. Chapman, from whom she received advice in regards to student participation, her classes ran more smoothly. Miss. Gonzalez stated, "... he told me to try my hardest in building those connections with them, and I have. I've created my lessons in being more student-led conversations and it has worked..." (personal communication, April 7, 2021). Her students felt more comfortable with how she conducted her class. The engagement was seen right away after that change was made. The conversation she had with Mr. Chapman also influenced more connections with her students. Roorda et al. (2011) emphasized that these close bonds students make with their teachers can lead to student success.

In connection with the rapport building and student success, Mr. Stevenson who has had plenty of classroom experience, always dedicates his first week of classes to build those relationships. But, with the circumstances we are under it was different, and he mentioned " my

first couple of weeks were so unusual. I always have team building activities but now that we are online it took us until the fourth week to be comfortable with speaking and participating” (J. Stevenson, personal communication, March 24, 2021). After that month of trying to make those connections, it was possible and his engagement in the classroom was seen more clearly. It can be seen that it was difficult for these teachers to construct some sort of connection with their students and develop an engaging community during these unpredictable times. Like Chu (2020) stated in his descriptions of the PERMA model, “relationships in a classroom with adequate quantity and quality of positive interactions, from instructor-to-student to student-to-student, can facilitate positive learning outcomes” (p.2). The four interviewees mentioned that to date the majority of their students complete their assignments and attend their afternoon office hours to receive that extra help they may need with their work.

The time required for this option is set at a medium because it can take longer for middle school teachers to build rapport with their students because of the shortened departmentalized classes. For example, at Jefferson class periods are only an hour and twenty minutes long. This time constraint can affect those teacher-student relationships but as they are built over the course of the school year the reach across the majority of students will be seen. The relationship-building techniques teachers use may not grab every single student’s attention which is why this option has a medium criteria rating. Teachers who put in the effort to create these connections with their students can result in it being highly effective. Students will begin to be more engaged, participate in class, and teachers will be more motivated to bring more creativity into their classroom.

### **Recommendation**

After closely analyzing the three options it is important to narrow it down to what is most important for the middle school students during virtual instruction. I would consider the implementation of growth mindset activities and building student-teacher relationships to be the best solution for student engagement. The data collected aligning with the literature indicates both of these options to best benefit the teachers and students.

### **Concessions**

While the combination of the two actions of providing more growth mindset activities and building student-teacher relationships is recommended, the third option of teacher collaboration does have its significant impact on student engagement. This option also makes an impact on the students because at these meetings it is where teachers get additional resources to use in their virtual class meetings. If it was not for these collaborative meetings, teachers would not have those alternative choices that can engage their students and develop new knowledge.

### **Limitations**

While both of the options are recommended, there are some limitations to consider. In regards to the integration of growth mindset activities, it would make much less of an impact on the students if teachers assigned these assignments in an asynchronous format. Students will not be able to discuss with the teacher and their peers what they are learning. It would also be contradicting if they would not be able to ask for help since the growth mindset focuses on practicing asking for help when needed. Moving to the second recommended option, a limitation that comes from trying to build those student-teacher relationships is that some students would still feel embarrassed or shy to speak over their microphone or turn on their camera. For that specific group of students, their preference might be communicating through the chat feature in the video calls which is not as effective when teachers are trying to have a conversation.



**Potential negative outcomes**

Some potential negative outcomes may happen with the recommendation to be set as the action solution. For instance, as the semester moves forward teachers will begin to put aside the growth mindset curriculum and not really implement those short activities into their classes. This can happen because they can get too caught up with their subject curriculum that needs to be taught. Doing this will possibly lead to students not being engaged or rather not even bothering to submit their assignments because they are not constantly reminded of what it means to have a growth mindset. Secondly, a negative outcome that can be seen from trying to build rapport in the virtual meetings is giving the student too much freedom with their assignments. If that leeway is a recurring situation other students will begin to take advantage of the teachers. As a result of that, when teachers want to then keep the students accountable for their missing assignment the students will choose to not listen.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the continuous implementation of growth mindset activities, and creating student-teacher relationships are the best solutions towards gaining more student engagement in a virtual class setting. Despite the limitations and potential negative outcomes, this combination of options will best suit middle school students who are having a difficult time with school during a pandemic. Furthermore, principals should continue to be a support system for their teachers when they are having difficulty with certain situations in their classes. This solution benefits the student population as a whole because teachers who engage their students and take the time to implement both actions may be more likely to have students who see them as mentors.

**Action Documentation and Critical Reflection**

The main focus for this Capstone project is to understand how middle school teachers are keeping their students engaged while distance learning. After interviewing four middle school teachers, who have been in the profession for a number of years, and doing intensive research, three different options for increasing engagement were brought to my attention. These three options include the continuous implementation of growth mindset activities, teacher collaboration participation, and building student-teacher relationships. After reviewing and discovering more about each option, I decided the combination of increasing growth mindset activities and creating student-teacher relationships would benefit in increasing student engagement. I picked this combination of options because they were the main topics that were brought up consistently throughout my interviews with the four teachers.

### **Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection**

As an action for my project, I got in contact with Mr. Chapman, the principal of the four teachers who I interviewed and explained the data I gathered from my interviews. After speaking with him, and discussing the current student engagement format that is being used at Jefferson Middle School I emailed him with two additional ideas that can be added to the school while students are in a virtual format. Since a growth mindset curriculum is already something teachers use, I suggested that every teacher should have growth mindset posters somewhere visible in their online classroom (see Image 1). By doing this students can see the posters on days where a growth mindset activity is not taught to them. It will help them remember the importance of what it means to have this type of mindset during middle school. Before I suggested this action, I researched and found free accessible growth mindset posters for teachers to use online and in the classroom when they return on campus. This will help Mr. Chapman to understand what I am

trying to act on in the long term and it can be a smooth transition for teachers to implement while virtual and then into the physical classroom.

The second idea is to possibly increase student-teacher relationships throughout the school. I suggested creating digital ‘Coyote Cash’ tokens that teachers can give to students who are engaged in their virtual classroom (see Image 2). Students will then be able to use these tokens to purchase school spirit wear or be entered in their school-wide raffle that already happens every two weeks. This is also great for teachers to have as an incentive for their students when they need to be accountable for the work they need to be doing. Something that I found surprising was the amount of positive feedback I got from some of the teachers who liked the idea of having the incentive “Coyote Cash” as a way to build relationships and to increase engagement in their classes. As I move forward with this action, I realized that once Jefferson Middle School is back to in-person instruction, it might be too much for teachers to continue giving these tokens out every day through every class period in a digital format. Therefore, I also found these tokens in a .pdf file so teachers can print, cut, and hand out when they see students putting in the effort in doing their classwork.

So far the implementation of having growth mindset posters has been successful. The introduction of “Coyote Cash” is still in the works because Mr. Chapman does not want to introduce something new to the students so close to the end of the school year. He also wants to talk with other teachers and hear their input about this new idea. At the start of the next school year, these incentive efforts will most likely go into effect throughout every class at Jefferson Middle School.

Now that I am almost concluding this capstone project, and looking at the action I have taken, I wish I had the opportunity to gather more data from other teachers about how they keep

their students engaged in their virtual synchronous classrooms. This would have helped me be more creative in the recommendations I would have for Mr. Chapman to bring into Jefferson Middle School. An important next step is to ensure all middle school principals are providing their teachers with important resources and new ideas that can increase student engagement while online and when students return on campus. One major characteristic that I saw within myself in the action I took with this project, is that even though I am not a credentialed teacher to be in the classroom, I still have creative ideas that can not only work in one middle school classroom but be included in the whole school where every teacher has more experience than I do.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

During these past challenging but enjoyable four years at the California State University of Monterey Bay, I have come across several opportunities that have impacted my future career as an educator. Those opportunities include the Liberal Studies MLO's, the required course work, and this Action Research Project. After looking through the five Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes, I identified MLO 1, MLO 3, and MLO 4 as the ones that resonated with me throughout the completion of this project and the opportunities I have had working with students these past four years.

I make a connection with MLO 1 which is labeled as Developing Educator because I can think, write and speak in-depth about the overarching concept of my project and how it is an issue in many schools locally. Through the knowledge, skills, and responsibilities of a developing California public educator, this project allowed me to connect with credentialed teachers who have been in this career for at least a year. This project has also allowed me to

communicate with the principal, another working professional at Jefferson Middle School who I now have contact with and can land a teaching position sometime in the future.

MLO 3 is identified as an Innovative Technology Practitioner and throughout this senior capstone project, I was confident enough to take on an issue that involved virtual learning in a middle school which has a heavy focus on technology. I was able to involve MLO 3 in this research project in different ways. For example, I had to get in contact with my community partner, plan and execute interviews with teachers, and research different literature to gain more knowledge about this issue all in a virtual setting. The designated action I decided to implement was also designed to be implemented in a virtual classroom where teachers can get more engagement from their students.

MLO 4 is titled as Social Justice Collaborator and my implementation with this learning outcome can be seen through my completion of this project. Being a social justice collaborator is someone who stands up for what is right depending on the circumstance they are in. Teachers, for example, should always stand up for their students so they can get the quality education they deserve. With my previous experience as a service learner, I can see how important it is to have an engaging classroom where students are both focused and learning at the same time. This project is integrated with that concept where the teachers at the middle school teachers need to see how their students work so they can implement certain ways of engagement in their classes. I was able to speak to different teachers and hear their perspectives about how they keep their students engaged in their virtual synchronous classes. After those conversations I had, I continued with a proposed action that can make a long-term impact on the students at Jefferson Middle School.

As I get closer to becoming a teacher, there are multiple things that I need to remember as I go into public education. Having an equitable classroom is one of the most important aspects of student achievement. When students are given what they need to be successful their interest in learning and applying will grow. Knowing there is a diverse group of students in the classroom, including methods that work for everyone, will allow for a safe classroom where students can learn, apply and overall become successful. Also, it is important to have a culturally relevant classroom going into effect once the teacher's instruction is respected towards the student's understanding of topics being taught. Participating in multiple professional development opportunities, and speaking to other teachers in the profession can help me be the teacher I envision myself being. Although many barriers will come my way as a teacher, I will ensure my instruction is constructed in a way that is effective for all of my students and ensure everyone is learning.

*Image 1.* Screenshot of the posters that teachers can get by inputting their name, school, and email address on the We Are Teachers website.

<https://www.weareteachers.com/growth-mindset-posters/#getForm>



*Image 2.* Screenshot of the Coyote Cash tokens .pdf file that teachers can give to students who are engaged in their virtual classroom



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