7-9-2003

The multiple dimensions of negative attitudes toward school among students in an urban high school environment

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THE MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL AMONG STUDENTS IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

by
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A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
July 6, 2003

Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved _____July 9, 2003_____

ABSTRACT

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The Multiple Dimensions of Negative Attitudes Among High School Students in an
Urban School Environment
2002/03
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Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to identify the sources of negative attitudes in a

high school environment through interviews and journal writing as a basis for qualitative

data. A sample of convenience was chosen that included six students with varied

characteristics of interest for the study. Students were asked to respond to journal

prompts at 3-day intervals and were interviewed for 25 minutes regarding their attitude

toward school. Sources identified in this study to be contributors to a negative attitude

toward school are incompatible teachers and teaching style, failure to have basic needs of

the students met, and the social surroundings of the school. Also studied was the extent

to which culture/ethnicity and relevancy of instructional material had an effect on

attitudes toward school.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

One only needs to observe a classroom for a few weeks to realize the amount of

disdain brewing in the attitudes of students in middle and high school. It is alarming to look

at defeated eyes and sagging heads, both of which suggest a feeling that many adults who

interact with these children everyday see and know, but one for which few can find solutions.

There appears to be an aimlessness present in numerous students where their negative

attitudes toward school have infected other aspects of their lives in the process. There is an

alternative, however, that is filled with eager faces and upright postures. This is the look of

inspiration, and it is a look for which many teachers strive but many do not attain. It is in

these environments that you see heated debates, lively discussions, and critical thought. The

fundamental question, then, is what is the cause of this discrepancy between defeated and

inspired.

The problem is complicated by the fact that oftentimes there exists an adversarial

relationship between student and teacher, whether it is verbalized or not, that makes building

the foundation for a happy and productive atmosphere difficult. Orange and Horowitz (1999,

p. 28) mention the common situation in which "teachers and students each had perceptions

that clearly counterbalanced those of the other." Though it is clear that students can be

happy and not productive and vice versa, neither alternative is preferred because of the

necessary sacrifice of enjoyment and motivation. When taken to the extreme, negative

attitudes toward school can become the springboard to drastic actions, much like those in

Columbine. Even more prevalent are the less visible (but equally as detrimental) problems

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like bullying, teen suicide, and attrition. Why do these attitudes toward school arise in so many of America's school population? Are students metacognitively aware of these attitudes toward school, and, if so, is there a solution lying somewhere in the student-teacher interaction? Do these attitudes correlate along racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, or other factors, and are there ways to work with these factors to find a gateway to an improved attitude toward schooling?

These questions become essential when developing plans to achieve the high levels of motivation and satisfaction mentioned earlier. To know the cause of students' negative attitudes is to provide insight into the implementation of units and plans that address the exact issue that is hindering student learning (while demoralizing teachers in the process). The relevance of the topic to the profession of teaching (and classroom teachers) relies heavily on the realization that a motivated and positively aligned student population leads to deeper thinking, lifelong learning, and a fulfilling experience in school. The key component is the necessary step of determining possible causes, patterns, and generalizations of both positive *and* negative attitudes toward school. It is also easily observable that apathy spreads virus-like from one student to another, and it is this apathy that can effectively eradicate any hope for the ideal of lifelong learners and pioneers of the future. Considering the conclusions that might be drawn from generalizable data about the influence or relationship of ethnicity/culture and students' attitudes and behaviors, methods of teaching can be created that are tailored to address these factors and the causes of negative attitudes. Worthy (2001, p. 569) notes that it is "essential to address students' preferences in order to capture their attention and engagement, and thus to foster learning." Many students are unhappy and unfulfilled in our schools, but it is unfair to assume that all student attitudes are a direct result

of instruction, school environment, or other similar variables. In fact, it would be presumptuous to do so considering divorce rates, child abuse, drug use, and other social factors. However, for the population of students with negative attitudes toward school who can be inspired by alternative methods in the classroom, an investigation into the specific issues that cause these attitudes becomes the cornerstone for change in America's schools. Nichols and Utesch (2001, p. 276) conclude that "(s)tudents who completed (an) alternative program experienced increases in extrinsic motivation; home, peer, and school self-esteem; and persistence toward the learning task." An inductive approach to address attitudinal issues beginning with the student and moving up through plans, curriculum, and school community seems to be the logical next step. Teachers choose their profession because it is their primary goal to instill in their students a sense that they (the students) are in control of their own learning. In today's schools, however, this ideal that is carried from teacher education into the schools fades as validation for teaching comes into question.

The purpose of this study is to identify the sources of negative student attitudes through the use of dialogue journals and interviews. The underlying assumption is that once a teacher can identify the sources of negative attitudes in a classroom, he or she can then modify the existing classroom atmosphere to help to improve attitudes toward school and create a learning community that is inviting and satisfying for the students in the class. The eternal question that teachers ask is, "Why are my students so unhappy while in my classroom?" It is the purpose of this study to investigate some of these reasons and provide a starting point for further study to improve the negative attitudes toward school that students in America currently hold. The following report includes a discussion of the recent literature about student attitudes toward school, a discussion of how this investigation was conducted

in a suburban high school setting and a discussion of the findings of the study. I also proffer some conclusions and recommendations for further research. Teachers want to know from where the frustration and anger that permeates many classrooms comes. This study responds to this question.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

"What happens to a dream deferred?" While Langston Hughes was not talking about education, a reading of the poem does speak volumes about the lethal effects of ignorance to aspirations, needs, and individuality. Though reform in education is always a focus in literature circles, little has changed in terms of classroom practice in America's schools in the last decade. Consequently, America's children are becoming increasingly discontent and indifferent about their daily experiences in the schools. What can be discerned from a review of the recent literature is that student attitudes result from a myriad of different circumstances, many of which are outside the teacher's immediate realm of control. As the following discussion of the literature suggests, there are essentially five sources of negative attitudes: affirmation of basic needs, ethnic/cultural background, teacher attitudes and teaching style, social surroundings, and relevancy of instructional material. Each of these factors has an impact not only on the ways in which students view school, but perhaps on their performance as well. A review of the literature suggests the need for more investigation into the effects of attitudes on performance as well as a need for strategies to combat negative attitudes that are detrimental to individuals and the cultures developed in the schools.

Affirmation of Basic Needs

Students in all situations require that their teachers take into account their individual basic needs. Unfortunately, many students view teachers as self-interested purveyors of facts with "the goal to teach their lesson . . . , (s)aving time and advancing their lesson" being the

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primary objective (Sheets, 2002, p. 119). The underlying principle is that students desire to have their basic needs affirmed and met. A constant fear of gang activity and violence permeates many students' minds to the point where academic study becomes relatively unimportant (Brouillette, 1999). Gonzalez (2002, p. 133) writes, "parental support . . .helps to offer a sense of security and comfort." Students need their parents to be involved and to feel safe in the learning environment. An environment without this safety and security leads to negative attitudes toward school. Younger and Warrington (1999, p. 232) agree stating, "girls preferred the security of working with friends," often "being able to concentrate on the subject instead of proving (themselves)." They continue to stress the importance of encouragement, structure, rapport, and students being treated as individuals. Failure to address basic student needs in the classroom may have a detrimental effect on the attitudes of learners.

Ethnicity and Culture

In New Jersey alone, there are more than 70 different languages spoken in students' homes. The result is a large number of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds that teachers must take into account when they plan and execute their lessons. When done well, a rich source of diversity becomes the cornerstone of a relevant and inviting class. Unfortunately, this is the exception, not the rule. Sheets (2002) notes a specific instance of Chicano students in an urban school. She writes that the students' feeling of "alienation appeared to be exacerbated by teacher indifference" (p. 111). Furthermore, she acknowledges the students' perception that "teachers don't take time to listen" (p. 111). Finally, she writes, "(Students) believed differences in their skin color, ethnicity, language, hair style, clothing preferences, and communication patterns influenced teacher

discriminatory actions" (p. 113). This situation of ignorance and devaluation of cultural diversity led to students who "openly stat(e) that they hat(e) school" and "don't care" (p. 111). One student poignantly reflects about his school experience, "I'm not a school kid. Never been. I'm not connected with what happens in school. I'm a nobody" (Sheets, p. 111). Given Sheets' study, it is easily discerned that students' understanding of their teachers' perceptions of their ethnic or cultural background has a major influence on their attitude toward school. More importantly, the attitude stems from the mishandling of these differences by teachers and administrators in schools.

Teacher Attitudes and Teaching Styles

It is not surprising to hear that student attitudes are closely related to the attitudes and teaching styles of the teacher. Sheets (2002, p. 111) cites a student's feeling that "teachers did not care whether she learned or not.". She continues, "When I ask teachers for help they ignore me because they think I'm not going to pass" (p. 111). For this student, entering the class meant enduring a situation in which the one person supposedly in charge and the one who is supposed to care the most cared very little. Orange and Horowitz (1999, p. 28) suggest there is a mutual resistance between students and teachers where "(t)eachers felt that students did not care, and students felt that teachers did not care." The result "does not bode well for enhancing the academic and social context of the school experience. Clearly students' perceptions of school and of their teachers can affect their achievement, performance, and attitudes about school" (p. 29). This dichotomy is a major source of the problem, and it is one that warrants investigation and alleviation. Day to day student-teacher interactions have a positive effect on attitudes. Le Mare and Sohbat (2002, p. 245) write, "When teachers were perceived as willing to help, students reported feeling comfortable, not

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left out, good about themselves, and pleased that the help would contribute to their learning." The alternative had the opposite effect: "The feelings students reported experiencing when faced with a teacher whom they perceived as unwilling to help included fear, rejection, anger, and concern about the implications of their inability to obtain help for their learning" (Le Mare & Sohbat, 2002, p. 244). Mirroring this notion are Younger and Warrington (1999, p. 237) who found that students "wanted to be able to ask for help when necessary; they wanted the teachers to be willing to go over things and to be able to ask questions without being made to feel stupid or humiliated." Aside from attitudes and biases held by teachers, the instructional practice itself can prove to have an impact on student attitudes. Garrett and Shortall (2002, p. 43) note that students see "more opportunities for laughter, companionship and creativity in the student-centered activities." Miller and Meece (1999) note that selection of content, and the difficulty of that content, have an effect on student perceptions and attitudes. They write of low-challenge academic tasks: "(T)heir open-ended responses revealed a strong lack of interest in this classwork because it was boring, meaningless, and minimally challenging" (p. 28). Student control over the content and the way in which the content is presented is equally important. Worthy (2002, p. 569) examines student attitudes toward reading and writes, "If we want to reach students, it is important to offer them variety in reading formats and to listen to their preferences." Heuser (2000, p. 294) views this notion as a necessity, noting that student choice is one framework that results in the "increase in the number of students intrinsically motivated to satisfy their own curiosity." Farber (1984) sees an increasingly dissatisfied teacher workforce, and it is this dissatisfaction that threatens to affect student achievement. Suffice it to say that there is a great deal of consideration that needs to be paid to the effect of teacher attitudes and teaching styles on student attitudes and

ultimately achievement. From the faces that teachers present and the approachability of their demeanors to the instructional practices that they use in the classroom, there is room to investigate whether there is an effect on the way students view themselves and their schooling.

Social Surroundings

As one comes in contact with students with negative attitudes, it is apparent that there is a social aspect to the ways in which students view themselves in and out of the confines of school. White-Johnson (2001) writes of the insistence of schools that students change their persona by abandoning norms to fit into rules and practices of school. A feeling of resentment, and ultimately disdain, results. Croninger and Lee (2001) note that students are at a much lower risk of dropping out of high school when they have a teacher who is available for guidance and support. This factor becomes increasingly important when that structure cannot be found outside of school. Gallagher (2002, p. 51) mentions the "cycle of alienation" where students feel like they have no place in the school community and social forces within the school affirm the fact. These forces ultimately lead students to feel hopeless about their lives, and the result of this hopelessness is often to drop out of high school. Brouillette (1999, p. 314) mentions the decline of emphasis on social constructs like family, churches, and community organizations contributing to a "nihilistic" attitude toward school and oneself.

The desire to be accepted by peers is a primary factor that motivates students to develop a negative attitude toward school. Younger, Warrington, and Williams (2000) note the clear difference in attitudes between boys and girls, the primary cause of this difference being the expectations placed on boys from teachers, administration, and, primarily, peers.

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Though lack of classroom management, stereotypical comments from teachers and peers, and an attitude that boys could succeed with less work all contributed to boys having a generally more negative attitude toward school than girls, the social acceptance of a boy's peers tended to drive behavior in the classroom and attitudes toward school and his schoolwork. The authors write, "Some boys clearly did work hard: not surprisingly, these were usually the boys in the high ability groups, although even here concern with image meant that they often pretended not to work or not care how well they did in examinations" (p. 396). While this uncaring attitude is a necessity for boys to retain credibility among peers, girls could lead two lives: "as long as they could be 'cool' out of school, it was acceptable for them to work hard in school" (p. 404). The importance of acceptance from a student's peers is further addressed by Ryan (2000, p. 101) where "the choices that adolescents make regarding their motivation, engagement, and achievement in school and the satisfaction they derive from their choices depends, in part, on the context in which they make such choices." This context involves peer groups, parental support, and guidance from other adults. Ryan (2000) concludes that modeling, conformity, and other socializing agents contribute to motivation and attitude toward school. Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (2001) note the effect of peers who are either deviant from school (students who are continually absent from school but have not officially dropped out) or have already removed themselves from the educational arena. They write, "students who associate with non school-orientated friends are more likely to develop attitudes not favourable to school achievement" (p. 413); the ultimate result is oftentimes the choice to drop out themselves. Cullingford and Morrison (1997) note that once a student is labeled as 'deviant,' it is very difficult for him or her to rid him or herself of that label. This inability to change the label leads him or her to find acceptance in other ways

(e.g., disruptive behavior). The acceptance of peers becomes a primary motivator for students to develop a negative attitude toward school and exhibit behaviors associated with this attitude in classrooms.

Relevancy of Instructional Material

Perhaps the most recently adopted theory of student attitudes and motivation is the relationship that they have with the relevance of daily lessons to the lives of students. Students are keen to the fact that the material presented has little or no relevance to their young lives in its generic form. It is only when teachers dedicate themselves to finding meaningful lessons that are engaging and applicable that students internalize and take ownership of their education. Simon (2002, p. 24) writes of a student who "wanted to find a way to connect school material to the questions she cared about most." She promotes the notion of the essential question where "students pursue content in the context of questions that matter" (p. 24). Brown (2002, p. 57) refers to the Soundings program that "incorporates many elements that researchers recommend to increase student engagement – differentiated learning activities, integrated curriculum, and authentic assessment." The program enables students to develop their own curriculum as well as the ways in which learning will be assessed. All of these strategies make the work that students are doing daily in their classes more real. In a multicultural atmosphere, teachers can "use the values, norms, and expectations of both cultures to create a learning environment that fosters positive school engagement" (Jones, Pang, & Rodriguez, 2001, p. 39). They acknowledge the cry for culturally relevant material that incorporates both the mainstream culture as well as the cultures that are present because of the members of the class. Tied into relevance to culture and meaningful life questions is the need for lessons that are relevant to the student herself.

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Freeman, McPhail, and Berndt (2002, p. 344) write, "Students prefer activities in which their attention, dispositions, and capabilities are most fully engaged. Knowing exactly what these situations of interest are appears to require attention to individual differences in attention, disposition, and capability in order to design educative contexts." Quantum theory is not going to be relevant to a student who desires to be an accountant, nor will it be appropriate for a learning disabled child in the classroom. Only when teachers take the needs of their students into account when they are designing lessons are the students going to be fully engaged and, as a result, aligned more positively toward school. Yair (2000, p. 205), in a study conducted to examine the ideals of the educational reform movement, agrees that there is a correlation between engagement and positive learning experiences stating, "authenticity, choice and skills significantly and substantively affect students' learning experiences." Finally, in one of the more intuitive realizations that I have come across in my research, Worthy (2002, p. 569) writes, "If we listen to students and attend to what they say about classroom instruction and reading materials, schools can have profound effects on students' motivation, engagement, and, ultimately, achievement." Simply put, students want to be involved in the selection process of materials and instructional practice and doing this ensures a relevant lesson. In the process, intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, and attitudes all are affected positively. The need for relevant lessons in schools as a means to improve attitudes toward school seems to be one of utmost priority and suggests that it is a key component if one were attempting to improve negative attitudes.

The research suggests that negative attitudes toward school are a result of the interaction between students and one or more of the factors previously discussed. While some factors are controllable (e.g., relevant instructional material, teacher attitudes), the

others are a result of societal influences that affect many different social institutions, not just schools. The research suggests that negative attitudes toward school can be the result of the inability of students to have their basic needs affirmed and met. Safety, parental support, and peer support all are important basic needs that, if not met, can contribute to a negative attitude toward school. The inability of teachers and students to find common ground in a multicultural setting is a major source of negative attitudes for minorities. A student's perceived lack of care from the teacher creates an environment where student and teacher are enemies. The irrelevance of material presented in classrooms can contribute to negative attitudes insofar as it relegates students to a passive role in their education. Finally, the many social factors inherent in schools can create negative attitudes through the devaluation of one's identity or a lack of support from the school and community. Assessing negative attitudes that students bring to school is a difficult process because of the multiple dimensions from which attitudes can arise. However, as teachers begin to truly know their students and the attitudes that they bring to the class, only then can there be attempts to enable students to free themselves from the clutches of apathy and indifference. Using the factors that have been reported in the literature as ones that influence and contribute to negative student attitudes toward school as my theoretical framework, I designed a study whose purpose was to examine the sources of negative student attitudes in a local high school. The specific research questions that have guided my study are:

1.   What are the sources of students' negative attitudes toward school?

2.   To what extent do students believe that their own attitudes, as well as those of their teachers, affect their attitudes towards school?

It may be naïve for teachers to believe that all of their students arrive at school ready and eager to learn. Just as some teachers have negative attitudes toward their students, students hold negative attitudes toward schooling. When the sources of negative attitudes are determined, it is my hope that instructional practice be modified to take these attitudes into account.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

A common complaint among teachers in the United States is the prevalence of negative attitudes that students have toward school. Oftentimes, however, little is done to ascertain the source of those attitudes. Instead, students are labeled as "lazy" or "losers." It is from this lack of communication and understanding between teacher and student that I developed a framework through which the sources of negative attitudes toward school are explored. Having been in the classroom for over two months, I was very familiar with my students and the behaviors they tended to exhibit in the classroom setting. Though I was not sure whether the behaviors that I was seeing were validly indicative of negative attitudes toward school, I did know that specific behaviors were indicative of a student's lack of involvement or apathy toward the classroom. The initial phase of the study focused on identifying those students who appeared to possess negative attitudes toward school using those behaviors that I had observed over the first two months of my placement. Students were considered to have a negative attitude toward school if they were observed to exhibit certain behaviors in the classroom. Table 1 below shows the behaviors for which I was looking during the identification phase of the research. These behaviors seemed to suggest that there was something about school that was turning these students off. After identifying students exhibiting these behaviors, the purpose of this study was to identify the sources of these problems.

Table 1: Observed behaviors that suggested negative attitudes

Sleeping in Class
Verbal Expression of Discontent
Physical Aggression (e.g. hitting a desk)
Slumping in Chair
Lateness to Class
Frequent Requests to Leave the Room
Habitual Absence from School
Refusal to Perform Academic Task
Excessive Non-Academic Conversation
Verbal Interruption of the Lesson

Though almost every high school student will exhibit these behaviors at one time or another, students with negative attitudes will exhibit these behaviors habitually. Avoidance seems to be a common theme that ties these behaviors together. At some level, these behaviors are used to avoid either academics or the social surroundings of a classroom. The physical avoidance behaviors (lateness, absence, requests to leave the room) were monitored assuming that removing oneself from the room is a reflection of the student's attitude toward school. Intentional interruptions (verbal expression of discontent, physical aggression, verbal interruption of the lesson, excessive non-academic conversation) were considered because they seem to show a student's apathy toward the academic process. The most common type of behaviors observed were personal disengagement tactics (sleeping in class, slumping in

chair, refusal to perform academic tasks). These behaviors show a personal decision to mentally remove oneself from the academic environment. McDermott and Schaefer (1996, p. 360) label these behaviors as "problem" behaviors that represent a student's "(deviation) from the developmental norm in structured settings such as schools." The observed behaviors that I used as a basis for identifying negative student attitudes are consistent with McDermott and Schaefer's study. Over a period of one week, I observed my classes while teaching. Because I was actively teaching the class, using a chart to track different behaviors proved to be impossible. Instead, I maintained a journal in which I wrote at the conclusion of the morning and the afternoon classes noting the behaviors for which I was looking, the students who were exhibiting those behaviors, and the general scene in the class at that time. At the conclusion of the research period (i.e., one week), I reviewed my journal and decided which behaviors would be used to select the population from which the sample would be chosen. This population represented the students in my class who seemed to have a negative attitude toward school. Though quite a few students exhibited these behaviors, it was apparent that there were students who exhibited these behaviors much more frequently than their peers.

After identifying the group of students who were considered to have a negative attitude toward school, a sample of convenience was used to select six students who represented several variables of interest. In addition to considering race and gender, I used the knowledge that I had gained over the previous two months about possible sources of these attitudes as another consideration for selection. For example, one student had spoken to me privately about a situation at home while another student had spoken to me about his inability to interact positively with his teachers. These students were selected because I

thought it would be beneficial to the study to determine the different influences on their attitude given their unique situations. Because I knew that I would have to interview these students in a short period of time, I selected only six students in this manner so that the sample size would be manageable. These six students became the basis for the research and provided information that addressed the research questions. A qualitative approach to data collection was used because of the complexity of the topic. Gay (1996, p. 211) writes, "The qualitative researcher seeks to derive and describe findings that promote greater understanding of how and why people behave the way that they do." Since I wanted to know the source of negative student attitudes, a qualitative approach was used. Because many of these attitudes arise from various sources and oftentimes these sources are not easily identified, a traditional survey report would be insufficient to uncover the underlying source. While a student may know that he or she has a negative attitude toward school, he or she may not know the causes. The interview process could therefore address this issue because I could then help the student get to the source rather than hoping that he or she arrived there individually. In addition, generalizability and replicability were not important because the data are specific to individual subjects and would not be relevant to another individual. Finally, the success of this study depends on the individual experiences of the subjects. It is impossible to predict the range of responses that could arise from the individual subjects. The only way to accommodate the diversity of responses was to qualitatively collect them through interviews and written responses (the journal). The students were asked to do two things: (a) to keep a journal that was focused on what they perceived to be their contribution to their attitude toward school, and (b) to meet with me for an informal interview(s) during a

free period in the day. The following is a discussion of these two research instruments and their purpose in the study.

Student Journal

The journals were not content-based but rather focused on the personal reactions that students were having toward school. The journals were originally more abstract and were used as a dialogue between me and the students. However, I found that the task was not concrete enough to receive useable data, prompting me to modify the journals using prompts that were aligned with different sources of attitudes. The students were given the journal and asked to complete the five prompts in 3-day intervals until they were finished. Students wrote at home so that their academics were not affected. Students were given specific prompts that asked questioned aimed to address specific sources apparent in the literature. For example, one prompt asked the students to discuss their interaction with teachers, to describe a typical interaction with a teacher, and to explain how these interactions have an effect on their attitude toward school. At the conclusion of the research, the journals' contents were analyzed to identify the sources of negative attitude that the specific prompt seeks to address. While one student wrote a great deal about his home life, another student focused more heavily on the interactions that he has with his teachers. The conclusions drawn from the journals were then used in the interview so that those sources could be examined more fully. Though it would seem that it would be difficult to get students with negative attitudes toward school to do the journal, I found that the students were eager to think about their school experience and how it affects their attitude. I was able to receive the journals in a timely manner with little or no prodding. The journals were collected the week before the interviews were to be held.

Interview Guide

The second instrument that was used to determine the source of negative attitudes toward school was a one-on-one interview between the student and I. These interviews were conducted during the student's free period using a modified version of the interview instrument cited in Baker (1999) (see appendix 1). The purpose of the interview guide was to find determine the source(s) of each student's negative attitude toward school. The questions were designed to elicit narrative responses from the students about their high school experience. After the narrative was given, I would then ask them to determine the effect that the experience had on their attitude toward school. Students were notified at least 2 days before the interview was to take place. The student and I went to a conference room in the library, and I recorded the interview using my personal computer and a microphone. The interviews varied in length and were dependent on student responses, but generally they lasted about 25 minutes. Using these two instruments, I attempted to find common themes that influence a student's attitude toward school. At the very least, the two instruments provided a spectrum of different sources of negative attitudes for these students.

Because the subjects are minors, a high sensitivity to privacy and appropriate questioning was required. Before any interview or journal data collection was initiated, I sought and received permission from both the student's parent (or guardian) as well as the principal of the school. The principal was notified when the research was conducted within the classroom, and he received all interview questions and procedures beforehand. However, I was the only person, other than the students themselves, who had access to the journals and the interview data. This ensured the students' confidentiality.

Setting and Context for the Study and Composition of the Sample

The specific makeup of the study group is typical of a semi-urban school. The study investigated high school students aged fourteen to sixteen. The students live in a highly populated suburban area of a large northeastern city, and the socioeconomic status of the students is generally low. Negative student attitudes are generally more prevalent in townships with low SES, but the literature does suggest that students can be negatively oriented toward school regardless of SES (Orange & Horowitz, 1999). The ability level of each student was average and reflects the fact that the selected sample is taken from classrooms that are heterogeneously grouped. The time period of the study was 5 weeks. Students who exhibited behaviors characteristic of a negative attitude toward school were identified in the first weeek. Five journal entries were completed during a 3-week period. The interviews were conducted during the final week of the study whenever timing was convenient between the student and me. Three weeks of journals were decided upon based on the fact that it would inevitably take some time for the students to get used to the system.

Data Analysis

An analytic inductive approach (Schloss & Smith, 1999) to qualitative data analysis was used based on the assumption that there are specific sources of negative attitudes and that there are students who are more likely to be affected by those sources. The analytic inductive approach hypothesizes a problem to be addressed before any data are collected. Data are then analyzed to explore the specific research questions. As necessary, the working hypotheses are then modified as they conform or fail to conform to the actual data that are collected. This approach lends itself to this study because I could assume that sources of negative attitudes exist (as supported by the literature), but the data collected are specific to

my research subjects. After the data were collected, I carefully analyzed the different media (the journals and the interviews) to find common responses/themes to questions posed in the journals and in the interviews. The interviews were transcribed from the electronic format to make identification of statements less difficult. Statements from the interview and journal data were categorized according to the five sources of attitudes mentioned in the literature review. Each response was coded with a number that corresponded to the particular student who reported it. After the responses were categorized, it became easier to generalize and thematically organize the data in a presentable form. After these themes became evident, supporting data in the form of direct statements from the interviews and journals were used. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants without revealing private information. The discussion of the results includes these themes with responses consistent with the theme. The themes provide a starting point for further study within that area.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussion

What has become apparent given the findings from the data, and given the conceptual support from the research, is that negative attitudes toward school are very complex phenomena that stem from very diverse sources and are different for every student perceived to have a negative attitude toward school. While initially I assumed that sources of negative attitudes would be finite and fairly consistent from day to day, I quickly learned that negative attitudes are highly dynamic and are often the result of a short-term source (though often they are combined with a long-term source as well). Unfortunately, there is no specific target at which a silver bullet can be aimed.

While every source mentioned in the literature review was named as a source of negative attitudes for at least one student, there were clearly sources that were most prevalent at this particular setting. Teachers and teaching style were by far the most cited source of negative attitudes from the sample, though the reasoning is often unique to each student. Second, affirmation of basic needs was also very often cited as a source of negative attitudes. Third, the social surroundings of the school, taking into account both the expectations of other students and inability of the participant to handle another's lack of respect toward the learning environment, was a prevalent source of negative attitudes among the sample group. An extensive discussion of each of these three sources will follow.

Relevancy of instructional material was cited by many of the participants in the sample, though often this source was intertwined with a teacher's inability to motivate

students. A brief discussion of this source will follow the more popular sources. Surprisingly, the lack of acceptance of cultural diversity and ethnicity did not prove to have an effect on negative attitudes at this particular placement despite the diverse population that the school holds. The general consensus among the sample was that this lack of acceptance was not a factor in contributing to negative attitudes while one student went as far as to say that the school and the other students have done a great job accepting the fact that there is diversity within the school.

Finally, emerging from the responses of the sample was a source that wasn't necessarily cited in the literature review but was a very important factor for the participants. The participants suggested that their inability to reconcile the time demands of their home lives and school lives was a pivotal source of a negative attitude toward school. Though this source could be considered a basic need, the responses suggest that this feeling is a unique source from the others. A discussion of this source will follow the sources identified in the literature.

Teachers and Teaching Style

Teachers and teaching style were most often cited as a primary source of negative attitudes toward school. While participants did say that individual personality conflicts do play a part in contributing to negative attitudes, the far more often cited source is a teacher's inability to adapt to the learning preference of the learner. Elie, a Hispanic-American student, states, "Teachers go about it in their own way, and sometimes their way of doing things isn't what I'm looking for and that's why it affects me negatively." Many of the participants held similar notions about the pedagogical choices that teachers make in their classrooms. Juanita, also a Hispanic American student, says, "I want (the teacher) to make

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sure we understand what we are learning and not just teach, think we'll know it, and then

move on to something else. It frustrates me and then I won't do it." Finally, Earl, a

Caucasian student, states, "I've noticed that some teachers will break down the homework

while others just tell you to 'Do this.' You look down and you say, 'How?'" In each case,

the participant highlights a teacher's inability to adapt to the learning environment to

individual students. The participants suggest that this inflexibility on the part of the teacher

leads to frustration, and, over time, they said that a numbing effect took over where the

student psychologically disengages from the learning environment. This disengagement led

to the behaviors cited in this study as those that suggest a negative attitude toward school.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Worthy (2001) and Younger and

Warrington (1999). David, an African-American, sees this lack of individual consideration

in teaching style in the most vivid light:

> When a teacher has a set list of things o do and won't change it, it makes me feel like
>
> I'm a computer because they have everything set for the whole year and they're just
>
> tying in to you.

Inherent in this statement is his desire for a teacher who is willing to adapt his or her teaching

style to meet the needs of the students.

Another very important aspect to the student-teacher interaction that was cited as an

important source of negative attitudes was the perceived lack of respect that teachers and

administrators held toward students. Earl states:

> If you are trying your best to get to the class and there is a fight in the hallway and
>
> you're late, some teachers don't give you a chance to explain. Why would you want
>
> to sit down and listen to her talk when she just pissed you off as soon as you walk

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through the doorway? At least we're making an effort to come to school and try to learn. At least we're not on the street killing somebody.

Earl sees his teacher's immediate response to his lateness as a personal attack on his sense of individuality. While he views his lateness to class as a result of circumstances beyond his control, he sees his teacher's reaction as an indication of a belief that he intentionally came to class late. When asked, Earl did not consider the opposite argument that the teacher might not have control over the lateness procedures, nor did he understand the reasoning behind why students need to be on class on time. Needless to say, however, the teacher's public reaction and inability to recognize Earl as a young adult capable of getting to class on time, or at least having a valid excuse for being late, created a barrier between his teacher and himself that most certainly developed into behaviors considered in this study to be indicative of a student with a negative attitude toward school. This perceived lack of respect was cited by William as well, and this lack of respect for him was an indication that the teacher thought that students are unequal and do not deserve to be treated as adults. He states, "One of my teachers talks to us like we are little kids that don't know anything, and that just makes you not want to be in the class and not want to learn." After observing this school for a few months, it became very apparent that these particular students desire and value the freedoms of adulthood. Though they are still young in many ways, the desire to be treated as an adult proved to be of highest priority. For William, this "disrespect" becomes the catalyst for a negative attitude toward the class. Though teachers were often cited as those who do not respect students as individuals with value, Elie notes the lack of support that a student feels from the administration when a problem arises in a classroom. He states, "(The administrators) walk around like they are higher than everybody and they put teachers before

students. If a student has a problem and talks to the administrator about it, they say, 'Ok. I'll do something about it.' and never do anything about it." Elie feels that he doesn't have a voice that is respected in the school, and he finds this fact "hard to deal with." In the interview, he mentions that after an altercation in the classroom, he doesn't feel welcome and has a hard time keeping a positive attitude. There were numerous other instances cited in the interviews and in the journals that highlighted the perceived lack of respect shown on the part of the adults in the building toward the students. Intertwined is the miscommunication and misinformation that both parties apparently hold. This fact supports findings in Orange and Horowitz (1999) concerning the adversarial relationship that develops between teacher and student.

Finally, participants suggest that a teacher's attitude toward the class, the students, and the learning environment all can contribute to a negative attitude toward school. Erin, a Caucasian student, states, "Some days I come in, teachers are in a bad mood and they take it out on you. When you come in on Monday and they jam all of this new stuff into you, it's overwhelming." Erin's indicates that the teacher's "mood" affects the way that she is reacting to the learning environment. She begins to feel negatively toward the class because the comfort of the learning environment is dependent on the teacher. Earl perceives some teachers and administrators as judgmental and limiting, basing opinions on past history and other factors:

> If your guidance counselor says you won't make it to a four-year school, it does take
>
> away from your morale. You have high hopes and big dreams and now this guy's
>
> going to shatter them all by saying that you are only going to a two-year college.

Earl is a student who showed signs of turning his negative attitude toward school around in the months that I observed him. Despite his efforts, he feels that the limiting effects of his history do have an impact on the attitude that he has toward school.

The data suggest that the student-teacher interaction plays an important role in developing a student's attitude toward school. Whether the attitude stems from pedagogical decisions, perceived lack of respect, or an adult's attitude toward a particular student or the learning process, each can alter the way a student behaves in the classroom. The participants in this study clearly state the effects that their own teachers have had own their attitude, and though the attitude is certainly not solely dependent on teachers (nor do I want to suggest that all adults in school have negative effects on students' attitudes), the actions of teachers do play a role in developing a student's attitude toward school.

Affirmation of Basic Needs

Another oft-cited source of negative attitudes toward school was the failure of the different forces in students' lives to fulfill their basic needs. Though basic needs are important in all schools and for all students, I assume that this source would most likely affect more students in settings similar to the highly populated semi-urban district to which I was assigned.

Amidst the gang activity, frequent fights, and the already tense post-Columbine and post-9/11 era (both of which were mentioned in the interviews), the need for safety is creating an environment where students do not feel safe in and around school and in turn develop behaviors that suggest a negative attitude as compensation for this uneasy feeling. Erin states, "I've been here my whole life. We have bomb threats. We have fights almost every day. If I could, I would go to a different school." Erin notes that she feels negatively

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towards the environment of her school, and it makes it hard for her to care about the occurrences in such a place. Erin's remarks are consistent with Brouillette (1999) where her own attitude toward school and the importance of her own learning become secondary to a constant uneasiness. Elie also feels the effects of a place that he perceives to be unsafe. He also cites the unpredictability of such threats to safety and their effects on his attitude toward school. He states:

> There are many places in school that are easy to get into and out of. I don't think it's right. For the most part we've been ok, but that's not to say that tomorrow someone won't come in here and say that they don't like our high school and start offing people.

When asked if this unpredictability has an effect on his attitude, he affirms and says that it is hard not to think about it. Elie and Erin seem to be more concerned with the bigger issues of safety, William points out that the daily occurrences of aggression become a contributor to his attitude toward school. He states:

> When I come to school, I'm perfectly fine. It's just when people start to confront you for no reason. After a confrontation, I'm still not ready for school until like two days later because I am still mad from before. Especially if it's from something really stupid.

William's inability to ignore the negative experiences of high school has a substantial impact on his attitude toward school. In the two days that it takes for him to be "ready for school," he exhibits behaviors consistent with those that define a negative attitude toward school for this study. Finally, Earl states, "If you want to learn but you always have kids nagging on you, you are just going to snap." Interestingly, Earl's reaction to negative high school

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experiences are more aggressive than William's, and this discrepancy is consistent with my observations of their personalities in a classroom setting. The need for safety is not being met for these students, and this problem contributes to an indifferent or negative attitude toward school.

The second basic need that is apparently a major concern among the participants, and a major contributor to a negative attitude toward school is the lack of fulfillment of the need for a stable home life. If indeed a stable home life is important in developing a sense of security and comfort, as suggested by Gonzalez (2002), the absence of such stability could contribute to a negative attitude toward school. Elie candidly states, "I have a big jerk of a stepfather who early in the morning will mess up my day for the rest of the day. When I go home, I have to deal with that too." Elie says that this problem at home was a consistent source of anger and angst that makes it hard for him to get through school. Interestingly, I observed Elie in the last period of the day before he had to face his difficult home situation, which may have played a part in my identification of him as a student with a negative attitude toward school. In the interviews, he was a quite pleasant and thoughtful young man with wisdom rare among people his age. I can't help but think that timing played a pivotal role in his being identified as a participant in this study. Erin has a similarly difficult situation at home that has changed drastically through her high school years. She states, "When I was with my mom, I didn't care what I did . . . and neither did she. My sister, whom I live with now, won't let me mess up like that. The structure at home helps me." In Erin's mind, an uncaring and unstable home life led to an uncaring and unstable school life, and her idea is consistent with Gonzalez (2002). Finally, William feels the effects of a home life that is not exactly ideal, leading him to lead a double-life. He states, "My home

experience hinders me a lot. I try not to think about it though because my attitude at home has to be totally different than here for me to learn." William must change his attitude daily from home to school, a transition that he doesn't find easy. William was identified as having a negative attitude toward school mainly because of his chronic sleeping in class as well as his apparent psychological disengagement from the class. Given these data, these behavioral results become far less surprising.

The data suggest that unfulfilled basic needs can have an effect on a student's attitude toward school. When these needs are not met, the participants suggest that unwanted (and often unnecessary) pressure is placed on them that hinders the way that they can function within school. Safety is apparently a major concern among the sample, and in the case of the participants, this need is not adequately being met by the school they attend. Peers and home life can also have an adverse effect on a student's attitude, and a negative attitude toward school among peers is seemingly contagious.

Social Surroundings

The final major source of negative attitudes among the participants of the study was the social surroundings of the school. Generally, this source manifests itself through other peers and their attitudes toward school. These peers can be close friends, but more often they are simply other students who are an impediment to a positive learning environment.

While it is tempting to think of the participants as individuals who are susceptible only to their own problems with school, it must be mentioned that a student's attitude is at the mercy of the attitudes of the other students in the classroom as well. David states:

Right now I have a lot of problems like being asked to proms and being pressured
into things you don't want to do. Outside forces show on you in school. Recreational
things can impact me, and sometimes they get me into trouble.

This "trouble" was prevalent in the few days before the interview where David could not
seem to control his impulses in the classroom and refused to do the assignment that the
teacher had prepared for him. Earl also felt this pressure in the classroom stating, "You are
sitting there trying to learn and you have two kids feuding with each other. It just doesn't
work." Because of the lack of interest in the material on the part of his peers, Earl finds a
classroom to be an uncomfortable place where he has trouble relaxing and learning. Over
time, this stress has contributed to his perceived negative attitude toward school. William
also is affected by the attitudes of his peers:

Some of the students in class can affect my attitude because of the way that they act.
They interrupt the whole class and it slows down the pace of the classes and it makes
you not want to be there."

William, a seemingly bright student and very capable of high complex thoughts, is hindered
by the social surroundings of his classroom, and as a result, he finds that his attitude toward
school is affected negatively. In the eyes of the participants, a peer's lack of respect for the
learning process can promote a negative attitude toward school.

Though the majority of students in the sample name their friends as one of the few
things that can be depended on in school and are a general positive influence on their
attitude, the study also suggests that negative relationships can have adverse effects on a
student's attitude toward school. This is especially true for Erin, who admits that her
sensitivity makes her more susceptible to negative peer relationships. She states, "I like my

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friends. Sometimes they are a support, but sometimes they'll ask me to ditch school and go to lunch. Many girls stab you in the back and do bad things to you." Erin's friends clearly provide her with the temptation to be truant from school, and interestingly her truancy was an important contributing factor to her selection in the study. Ryan (2000) highlights this exact phenomenon where decisions are influenced by peer groups. For Erin, the negative and indifferent attitude toward school that her friends hold is a temptation. Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (2001) address similar contagious attitudes with which Erin is tempted. Though Elie feels that his friends are very important to him and keep him grounded during school, he mentions that there are relationships in school that negatively affect his attitude. He states:

> I don't like ignorant people in school. People who judge people by how they look, what they talk like, or what kind of music they listen to. They don't even give them a chance and decide that they are someone that they don't want to be a part of.

Elie, a generally positive person who makes friends easily (despite his perceived negative attitude toward school), talked extensively about how these "ignorant people" make him not want to be involved in the school. He continues to say that many students (himself included) "can't necessarily be themselves in school," echoing the findings of White-Johnson (2001). While negative friends do have an impact on negative attitudes toward school, I was struck by the generally positive experience that most of the sample had with peers. Without the positive peer support that they suggest they have, their attitudes toward school could conceivably be a great deal worse.

The social surroundings can have a negative effect on the participants' attitudes toward school. Peers, and their apparent lack of a positive attitude, can adversely affect a

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student's attitude, and a negative attitude toward school among peers is seemingly contagious. Friends can also contribute to a negative attitude, and the attitude spreads similar to other behaviors promoted by peer pressure and the desire to belong.

Relevancy of Instructional Material

While the literature suggests that the material that students learn in school and its relevance to a student's life is a primary contributor to his or her attitude toward school, this study only mildly supported this contention. There were a few instances where the participants named the instructional material as somewhat contributing to their negative attitude toward school, but as stated before, most instances were intertwined with a teacher's style. David has trouble reconciling his love of "real" history and the drabness of the textbook from which he learns: "There is a lot more about history rather than just going in the textbook and reading stories in there." David wishes that he could experience history through pictures, artifacts, and the people who lived it, citing his extended family as a great source of history for African-Americans. This notion is very similar to the work of Simon (2002). William wishes that he had more choice in his education, especially regarding the books that he reads. He states, "If you give us a bunch of books and ask us which one we would prefer to read, I would probably read a couple of pages from each one and see which book I would like." This lack of choice, echoing Yair (2000), exposes William to a negative experience with a novel for weeks at a time. It is unclear to me whether the participants in the study were genuinely happy with the material or if the material is not as visible in their minds as a source of negative attitudes. While the research suggests that relevancy of instructional material is a primary factor in developing student attitudes, these data do not strongly support this conclusion.

Competition for Time: an Emerging Source?

In my review of the literature, I found little evidence to suggest that the demands for time that young people today face play a role in developing attitudes. However, the data suggest that this inability to find separate time for school, work, play, and family contributes to attitudes toward school. Elie states:

> "I don't want to sound like a preacher or anything, but kids do work, they have other things they have to take care of, they get home and do homework until two in the morning and don't get that done. They fall asleep and wake up the next morning all groggy and everything gets messed up."

In an increasingly demanding society, Elie has trouble reconciling his desire to excel in school, his need to work, and his right to be a young adult. Elie sees the cycle that can emerge from too much demand for time, and he sees the results of a student, like himself, who hasn't figured out how to accommodate those demands. Erin has a similar problem with time because she needs to take care of her grandmother after school:

> A lot of people have other things to do after school, not that school is not important but people have to work after school and I have to go to my grand mom's after school and help her. You have other things to think about besides school.

Erin, too, has difficulty fitting school into her "real" life, and she says that this difficulty can lead to a negative attitude. Earl states that he doesn't want to be "surrounded by school all of the time," supporting his peers' positions that balancing the different aspects of life is difficult and can have an effect on attitudes. It is unclear whether this source has existed for some time or if it is a relatively new pressure brought on by the technological age.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The data support conclusions found in the literature that negative attitudes toward school for the participants are a result of varied, finite sources that can be both temporary as well as permanent. For this sample, the student-teacher interaction seemingly is the primary source of negative attitudes toward school, whether it is a result of an inflexible teaching style, perceived lack of respect, or a teacher's own attitude toward school. The failure of the forces in the participants' lives to meet their basic needs is also an important factor that contributes to negative attitudes toward school. Safety in school is an especially critical force that has increased in importance given recent events. Finally, social surroundings contribute to negative attitudes because people around the participant either have a negative attitude themselves or promote a negative attitude on the part of the participant. The data do not heavily support relevancy of instructional material as a primary contributor to negative attitudes for this sample group. Cultural/ethnic factors also were not of major importance for this sample as a contributor to negative attitudes. Arising from the data is an inability to reconcile the time demands brought on by school, work, family, and adolescence. This proves to be an important factor when determining negative attitudes. The data also suggest that students perceive the outside forces (teachers, surroundings, etc.) to be the primary determinant of negative attitudes toward school. While the second research question seeks to determine if students see both their teachers' and their own contributions to the attitude, this sample suggests that their teachers are more responsible.

While the data support these conclusions for this sample, the findings have only very limited generalizability and thus cannot be relied on as a valid indicator of student attitudes in other settings. These findings are simply of a place and time in the lives of six students with whom I had contact over a period of three months. Interestingly, I saw a great deal of variability in the attitudes of students in this sample where some days a student would have a positive attitude and some days a student would have a negative attitude. This makes identifying students with consistently negative attitudes much more difficult.

Perhaps the most interesting finding that was not addressed in this study and should be considered for future research is the extent to which students with a negative attitude are cognitively aware of this attitude. Five out of the six students that I interviewed genuinely believed that they had a positive attitude toward school while the other said the attitude was average. The question, then, is if students don't know they exhibit behaviors consistent with negative attitudes, how can they be expected to change them? One recommendation is to develop a study that can accommodate for these attitudes on a wider scale so that data can be generalized. Finally, because the literature shows a basis that negative attitudes do exist, the responsibility lies in finding ways to combat these negative attitudes in the school setting.

The final question that I asked all of the participants during the interview was the following: If you could make school a better place for you, how would you change it? This proved to be the most rewarding part of the research because the students apparently know what they want and need. It is up to teachers, administrators, and the research community to provide for these needs. Elie states:

> I would find administrators who respect the needs of kids and teachers as well. I
>
> would find teachers who respect kids and want them to prosper in the world. I would

also try to find some ways to make certain students accept the class. If you can find a teacher that is open to new ways of teaching, I think it would be better for kids. Clearly, Elie has a very good handle on his needs and the needs of his peers. The way the research community and the educational community react to this challenge is the most important factor.

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APPENDIX 1

APPENDIX 1

Questions for Sample Group:

> This interview is being carried out as part of a master's degree research project. While your participation is voluntary and you are not required to answer and of the questions herein, your cooperation and participation are important to the success of the project and are greatly appreciated. If you choose to participate, please understand that all responses are strictly confidential and no personally identifiable information is being requested and none will be reported. If you choose not to participate, you are assured that your decision will have no effect on your grades, your standing in class, or any other criteria that affect your performance in class.

1. How do you feel about school?

2. If you could rate school a number from one to four, one being you hate every second and four being you love it all of the time, what would you rate it?

3. What are the things that you like best about school?

4. What are the things that you like least about school?

5. Do you have problems in school? What kinds?

6. Do you have hassles with schoolwork (getting it right), understanding it, finishing homework, getting along with kids in class, getting along with teachers?

7. Is your classroom a nice place to be?

8. Do you feel comfortable at school? Safe at school? Are there adults who care about you at school?

9. Do your teachers care about you? How do you know?

10. If you have a problem, do you feel comfortable going to a teacher? Why or why not?

11. Do you disagree with any of the rules in the classroom? Lunchroom? Hallways?

12. Do the rules make sense to you?

14. What do you think the biggest issues in school are for kids your age?

15. If you could make school a better place for you, what would you change?