

2022

Movement for a Purpose: The Middle School Classroom and Student Engagement

Emily F. Chestnut

Ocean Bay Middle School, echestnut@horrycountyschools.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle>



Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chestnut, E. (2022). Movement for a purpose: The middle school classroom and student engagement. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 125-127.

This Article is brought to you by the USC Aiken at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Published online: 1 March 2022
© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

Movement for a Purpose: The Middle School Classroom and Student Engagement

Emily Fehlig Chestnut
Ocean Bay Middle School
echestnut@horrycountyschools.net

Abstract: When students reach adolescence, they begin to lose their excitement for learning and student behavior declines. Many students lose interest in their schoolwork because too many educators are still relying on the traditional classroom model. Research evidence reminds middle school educators why movement is an essential physical and emotional component of adolescent learning and development. The aim of this article is to remove the negative or stressful stigma many educators have about movement in the classroom and provide practical strategies to allow students to move each day.

Keywords: adolescent development, movement, strategies, classroom management

Introduction

Recently I observed a classroom rule that caused me to question the traditional classroom model. In this particular observation, the teacher indicated a rule that read, "Movement only for a Purpose: Kleenex, sharpen pencil, emergencies." This anecdotal experience presents an interesting point on the impact that traditional rules could have on a student's experience. Thus, my immediate thought was, what if movement had a purpose other than a classroom procedure? Instead, teachers could redefine the movement for a purpose, as a movement that actually works to enhance learning and student engagement within the classroom.

When we think of a traditional classroom and expectations the first rules that come to mind are: remain in your seat, stay quiet, and stay focused. The problem is that these three things don't go hand in hand. It can be especially difficult for adolescents to follow the traditional rules that require them to sit still and remain quiet for an entire class. Research shows the traditional classroom model is no longer effective for students. A recent survey conducted by Gallup (Brenneman, 2016), found that only half of the adolescent participants within the study reported feeling actively engaged in school. Sadly, about a fifth of the participants reported that they were completely disengaged.

In addition to students not being engaged in class there has been research conducted to analyze the impact that age has on engagement. In a recent study, Brenneman (2016) found that

as students' age increases, their engagement in class decreases. Knowing this, some middle school teachers find that their role has become to help engage students and encourage the enjoyment of learning. One reason students lose interest in learning is due to the unrealistic expectations in the classroom. As students progress in school they typically experience less time for physical activity and hands on learning. In the book *How to Deal with Teenage Learning Fatigue* (Philip, 2007), the author identifies students' inability to focus or be engaged in a classroom with less physical activity as learning fatigue. The author suggests that if we implement more fun and engaging activities into the classroom teachers could help avoid learning fatigue.

Why Movement Matters

Students are receiving less time to move than ever. Specifically, adolescent students have a decrease in recess time and daily physical education. While recess and physical education play critical roles in student learning, classroom teachers can also incorporate movement in to their daily classroom routine. Utilizing movement in the classroom could be especially beneficial for students in middle school. Research shows that middle school students typically can stay focused on a task for about 10-12 minutes (Vawter, 2009). The benefit to allowing students to move more frequently in the classroom is that it gives them the opportunity to hit the reset button and process their learning. When teachers implement planned movement activities into the classroom, they are supporting a child's ability to relieve built up stress and promoting the use of relaxation strategies (Boswell, Boni and Mentzer, 1995). Some research has even found that exercise can be a catalyst to help with the growth of an individual's brain (Jensen, 2005). Overall, when students are not given enough opportunity to exercise throughout the day it is actually hindering the student's ability to learn within the classroom (Jensen, 2005).

Strategies for Using Movement in the Classroom

As a 6th grade science teacher I learned quickly that my students are not able to sit still for long. Instead of allowing this to be an obstacle I decided to use it to my advantage by asking myself, how can I use my student's energy to enhance learning in my classroom? Below are a few strategies I use to keep students moving daily.

Station Activities

Station activities are efficient and effective, especially in a science classroom. Utilizing stations to structure the class allows students to stand and move frequently while also allowing time for a variety of activities. Additionally, they provide an opportunity for a variety of learners to be successful and they implement natural reinforcement. When splitting students up into stations, students are assigned groups and move from station to station about every eight to ten minutes, depending on the activity. The teacher sets up a classroom timer on the screen, to provide a visual aid to students so that they can follow along and self-pace their group to complete each activity. It is important that students stay within smaller groups, and group numbers do not exceed

four to five students. Additionally, stations are meant to be flexible and provide students with the choice to sit or stand throughout the rotations. In general, the more flexibility that students have when in stations the better it is for incorporating movement with a purpose into the classroom.

Gallery Walks

Gallery walks can be used as an introduction activity, vocabulary practice, or reflection activity. In this activity, teachers post pictures around the classroom or hallway and allow students to visit each picture to complete the activity. For example, I used a gallery walk for reading weather maps. Students had 15 minutes to visit ten weather maps and predict the weather in ten different locations. When students are walking around the gallery they should have a worksheet to help guide them throughout the activity. Typically, Gallery walks are individual work for students, so the room is usually quiet. However, the activity is still implementing structured movement for students as they are up and moving around to complete their work.

Act it Out Vocabulary

I have found that this activity is a student favorite. To start the activity, you choose one student from the class to be “it”. This student holds a vocabulary word on their head or the teacher displays it behind them on the board. The remainder of the students in the classroom act out the term silently. The student has 30 seconds to guess the word. This can be done as a whole class or small groups with two to three students. This activity is great for test review or a closure activity in the last five minutes of class. This helps students recall vocabulary by using kinesthetic learning to help students with memorization of specific key words or concepts.

Walking Notes

When teachers have expectations that students should sit for an entire 60-minute class period and take notes, it is unrealistic. Instead of practicing traditional note-taking in my classroom, I began walking notes. This takes no more prep-time for teachers than preparing a PowerPoint. The teacher prints out PowerPoint slides and hangs them around the room. Students walk around to each slide and take notes from the slide. To check for understanding the slide usually has a question related to the material. Students can be given up to three minutes per slide to take notes and then they rotate to the next PowerPoint slide hanging on the wall. While this is allowing movement, this is not a collaboration activity. In this activity, students are expected to work independently. When using walking notes, it is most helpful for the students when teachers provide guided notes. Guided notes often have bullet points or fill in the blanks for students to complete that are related to the slide. During the last 15 minutes the class comes together to discuss the material as an entire class. This can be done by playing a review game, discussing the check for understanding questions, or by showing a video.

Seat Swap

This is a quick activity that teachers can use when the lesson that is planned for the day, does not include a lot of

movement. In my classroom, I include a seat swap slide in a PowerPoint when the lesson includes a lot of material or note taking. In this activity, students have five seconds to gather their materials. Once they have their materials, the teacher plays a fun song for about 20 seconds. At which point, students can rotate around their lab table and find a new seat (it should be noted that students stay within their group, to help with classroom structure). All students must be seated when the music stops and then class continues. Even though this a quick activity, it gets students up and moving around the classroom.

Flexible Seating

When students are working individually, a strategy I use to encourage some movement and flexibility in the learning environment, is that I give students the opportunity to choose their work space. Some teachers may choose to have carpets or couches in their classroom for flexible seating. However, you can also use flexible seating without new furniture in the classroom. I have found that some students work better standing up, some sitting on the floor, some just want to move to a table that isn't a desk. Flexible seating is used for individual worktime. Some of the expectations that teachers can provide to their students for flexible seating include: pick a seat that helps you focus, use each seat appropriately, be respectful of others in the classroom, work individually, and the teacher has the right to move you at any time. In my classroom, I have notices that students enjoy flexible seating because of the freedom they have. Using this activity, flexible seating, shows students that learning can be comfortable and they have some choices in their learning experience.

Setting Boundaries: Classroom Management

The purpose of movement is meant to enhance instruction not distract students. While movement adds a functional activity into the classroom, boundaries and expectations must be set to ensure effectiveness.

Timing is Everything

Chunking is key to effectively incorporating movement into the classroom. As previously mentioned, middle school students often can only focus on a single task for about 12 minutes. Thus, teachers should try to plan lessons in about 15 minute chunks with incorporating movement in between each lesson. As a middle school teacher, I plan my lessons with timers on every few slides to help with the flow of chunking lessons. For example, use a 20 second timer for students to complete a seat swap then, have students read an article for five minutes at each station, continue with this for several stations. Providing specific times for students shows them that the movement is not play time, but a part of instruction. Structure in the activity helps students remain focused and not lose sight of the purpose in the lesson.

Model, Practice, Repeat

Movement is not common in many classrooms, which means students may have not experienced the activities listed above. Thus, in order for students to understand them, they must be practiced and modeled frequently at the beginning of the

school year. For example, students will not remain quiet in walking notes the first time and teachers should be patient with their students. So, the teacher may have to demonstrate walking notes or complete them as a class and then in pairs before students can work independently. It is important that teachers model each activity, have the student's practice, knowing they may make a mistake, and repeat this as often as needed.

Be Consistent

So, knowing all this information teachers should understand that, movement matters! Utilizing movement within daily lesson plans is a great way to manage movement in your classroom. When movement is a part of students' daily routine it becomes more natural to them. It is important to note that movement should not be used as an incentive. Instead, movement should be a consistent normed activity that is completed that your students look forward to and start to enjoy learning.

Conclusion

When movement is used to help organize the classroom, the environment becomes a student-centered classroom. As educators, it is our job to create learning environments that meet the needs of students. Thus, allowing movement in the classroom meets the needs of all learners. Especially those that developmentally may need more opportunities to move around throughout the day. Movement provides opportunities for students to enjoy learning and become comfortable in the classroom. In my personal experience, movement in the classroom has increased excitement and decreased behavior problems. The activities highlighted in this article are only some ways that teachers can use movement in the classroom. It is encouraged that teachers get creative and use movement in a way that is most appropriate for their classroom. If movement in the middle school classroom becomes the new standard, I believe we will see more positive results with academic and behavioral concerns.

References

- Boswell, B. B., & Mentzer, M. (1995). Integrating poetry and movement for children with learning and/or behavioral disabilities. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 31*(2), 108.
- Brenneman, R. (2016). Gallup student poll finds engagement in school dropping by grade level. *Education Week*.
- Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Phillip, R.T. (2007). How to deal with teenage learning fatigue. *Edutopia*. <https://www.edutopia.org/engaging-tweens-teens>
- Shoval, E. (2011). Using mindful movement in cooperative learning while learning about angles. *Instructional Science, 39*(4), 453-466.
- Vawter, D. (2009). Mining the middle school mind. Middle Matters. *National Association of Elementary School Principals*. https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/resources/2/Middle_Matters/2009/MM2009v17n4a2.pdf

About the Author



Emily Chestnut is a graduate of The University of South Carolina's Middle Level Education Program. She also completed her Masters degree in Teaching and Learning at UofSC. Go Gamecocks! Mrs. Chestnut currently teaches 6th grade science in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Mrs. Chestnut loves teaching science because science is relevant to students' everyday lives and opens a variety of opportunities for sparking student interest in future STEM careers.

Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Chestnut, E. (2022). Movement for a purpose: The middle school classroom and student engagement. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal, 125-127*.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: 1 March 2022

© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education