

Student Apathy As Defined By Secondary Agricultural Education Students

Ann M. De Lay¹ and Benjamin G. Swan²

Abstract

Student motivation continues to be a source of concern for educators. This phenomenological study captured the voices of secondary agriculture students as they shared their perspectives and experiences surrounding student apathy. Four focus group interviews were conducted at four central California high schools with distinguished agriculture programs. The following question guided the research: What experience do secondary agriculture students have with student apathy in their academic environments? Findings suggest student apathy is born of personal choice and grown through mediocre teaching, archaic assessment and the absence of learning purpose. Recommendations suggest students, teachers, the local school and teacher educators form a unified front to combat the phenomenon through purposeful and consistent action.

Keywords: student apathy; student engagement; student motivation; classroom management; agricultural education

People crave experiences requiring engagement, promising challenge and the opportunity to use personal skills (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005). Activities where these characteristics are absent motivate individuals to withdraw. Teachers in classrooms nationwide have expressed frustration toward the neutrality students demonstrate toward the academic experience (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). A low achieving, bored, checked-out student body can be found in virtually all institutions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris; 2004). The phenomenon, caused by a myriad of interrelated factors, leads to very real consequences (van Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2013). While many students thrive academically, just as many approach learning with indifference; choosing to fail rather than run the risk of being seen as “average or below-average” (Raffini, 1986, p. 53). The gap between the perspectives teachers and students have about shared classroom experiences continues to grow with little successfully bridging the two (Littlejohn, 2008). Additionally, the student belief success can be achieved through minimal effort has fast become the norm (Hwang, 1995). Although the list continues, these weighty challenges have evolved into a resistant learning culture.

Student academic performance is central to the accountability focus directing the educational system in America. The most recent standards-based reform movement was fueled by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB held students to the same set of academic standards, dramatically increased testing requirements for students, and defined teacher qualifications. Schools failing to meet performance benchmarks would see reductions to funding and would be required to implement supports to improve their progress (Reeves, 2003). Despite increasing student performance expectations, learner disengagement has not improved (Thompson, 2008). Rather, student resistance to learning has slowly leaked into postsecondary

¹ Ann M. De Lay is an Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education in the Agricultural Education and Communication Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, Email: adelay@calpoly.edu.

² Benjamin G. Swan is an Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education in the Agricultural Education and Communication Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, Email: bswan@calpoly.edu.

education. Universities have noted a steady increase in student grades for mediocre work, and less participation and overall investment (Hassel & Lourey, 2005).

Student apathy has been examined from a number of perspectives. While many studies looked at the phenomenon through the lens of teachers, younger participants, and vocational programs abroad, little is known about secondary students' experiences; especially those of secondary agriculture students. The program model for agricultural education provides students with integrated opportunities of coursework, leadership development and supervised experiences (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). The three components encourage students to be more fully engaged in their own learning, both in the classroom and beyond. Agricultural education is not immune to the challenges student apathy presents.

Teachers of secondary agricultural education have expressed a growing concern over the challenge to get students motivated to participate in the opportunities available. Boone and Boone (2007) indicated experienced teachers struggle with a lack of student motivation evidenced by apathy, negative attitudes, and hesitation with their commitments. Researchers (Burnett & Moore, 1988; Camp & Garrison, 1984; Croom & Moore, 2003) have identified "having a negative attitude toward school" as the number one ranked misbehavior in 1984, 1988, and 2003. Despite the historically successful educational model, student apathy may be a contributing factor to the erosion of males in FFA leadership roles and student participation in Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE). In states like Florida, females are overtaking males in FFA career development events and leadership opportunities due to displaying higher levels of motivation than their male peers (Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd; 2010). With SAE, participation has traditionally been dependent upon external motivators (Bird, Martin & Simonsen; 2013) and has declined steadily over time (Lewis, Rayfield, & Moore; 2012). Despite the historical engagement of secondary students within the three-circle model of classroom, FFA, and SAE, how can today's agricultural education student be engaged despite their apparent apathy for learning?

Theoretical Framework

Wlodkowski asserted motivation is essential to learning and learning cannot happen apart from it (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer & Ball 2008). A student's motivation is comprised of his attitude toward himself, his teacher and the subject matter, in addition to his expectancy of success. The better a student feels about himself, his teachers and the content, and the more positive he is about his learning outcomes; the greater his motivation to learn. Students with negative perceptions of self, teacher and subject, along with low expectancies withdraw; seeking to protect themselves by engaging in behaviors which read as apathy. Fisher (2005) described these behaviors as ways students contend with failure.

The mismatch in motivationally-related perspectives is seen in Thompson's (2008) work. Through her survey study, Thompson found teachers and their students have opposing views about the educational experience, particularly from the perspectives of minority students. While teachers believed they had positive relationships with their learners, many of their minority students disagreed stating they did not feel their teachers demonstrated affective qualities like caring. Furthermore, teachers viewed themselves as competent practitioners who had high expectations of their learners and established curricular relevance to students' lives. The minority students in the study conversely viewed their teachers as sub-par, unfair, and having low expectations of them and their learning. While many of these learners claimed a desire for postsecondary education, their teachers did not feel they would be successful. The minority students also believed their classroom experiences to be irrelevant and lacking stimulation. Combined, these factors created a feeling of apathy hindering their academic performance.

Littlejohn (2008) also applied Wlodkowski's assertions to the experiences of English language learners about their experiences in English class. His findings suggested the students viewed their learning as lacking purpose. They did not see the relationship among lessons rather

they viewed them as an arbitrary collection with no connection to their personal lives. They also felt they had little control over their learning and often blindly followed the teacher's directions. The outcome of such actions on students was emptiness, a lacking of any sense of accomplishment. When prompted by the interviewer to think more critically about their learning, the students blamed others or made comments to brush off pressure in an effort to shield themselves from accountability.

Schunk (2004) shared a three-phase model of motivated learning based on a synopsis of the concept's associated theory base. The *pretask* phase involves the conditions impacting one's motivation entering a learning situation. These include: the students' goals for the experience, the expectations they have for their abilities and the learning, the value they place on the task, their affect toward learning, their individual and academic needs, and the social support they may or may not have available (Schunk, 2004). The convergence of variables related to the teaching and learning environment, impact the *during task* phase. The instructional decisions involving the methods and materials a teacher uses to facilitate, combined with the class time and setting, and the student's ability to learn and remain engaged are all critical factors. Finally, the *posttask* phase begins when the task is finished and students examine their work. Students who believe they are progressing and achieve positive outcomes will continue their commitment to learning.

Elements of Schunk's work, in particular the *pre-task* phase, can be seen in Hwang's (1995) examination of the academic-mindedness of Asian-American and American students. A number of distinct differences surfaced, many as a result of the American culture. Asian-American students rise from a culture where education is believed to be necessary to a successful future. This deeply held conviction yields students who devote more time and energy to their learning and display more classroom-friendly behaviors with academic success as the likely outcome. With American students, the pervasive over-indulgence of unfounded compliments, lack of self-responsibility, glorification of the path of least resistance, absent parents, and placing blame elsewhere for shortcomings have created a serious problem in schools today. Before one can explore potential solutions for making classroom learning an optimal experience (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005), those struggling with apathy must be heard.

Purpose

The National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011) identified the need for engaged student learners as a research priority area for agricultural education. The intent of this phenomenological study was to extract meaning related to student apathy, from the lived experiences of learners in secondary agriculture programs. A picture and definition would then be developed. The guiding research question was: How do students in the secondary agriculture program perceive their experience with student apathy?

The greatest limitation to the study was the influence of researcher bias on data collection and analysis (Crotty, 2003). The researchers are former secondary teachers and currently teach at the postsecondary level. They have rich experience with the phenomenon of student apathy as former students and as teachers. To minimize the effect of personal experience on the research process, they bracketed their personal biases by writing and repeatedly reviewing personal subjectivity statements and triangulating data (Moustakas, 1994). By recognizing the potential for researcher bias, they were better able to ensure all decisions were data-driven. Additionally, participant ethnicities did not reflect the breakdown in the schools because experience with apathy and willingness to take part in the study were of greater concern. Lastly, the study's results should be reviewed only in the context of the participant groups involved. The reader is cautioned not to extrapolate the findings to a larger population.

Methods

Qualitative methodology offers researchers the opportunity to conduct research with a highly individualized focus. The theoretical perspective of this study was rooted in phenomenology, and its methodology in phenomenological research. These selections ensured existing understandings of student apathy were cast off, permitting the creation of new understandings and meanings (Crotty, 2003).

All researchers must address measures of reliability in their work. In qualitative research, this is accomplished through the standards of rigor (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). Credibility relates to confidence in the data and findings presented. The study's credibility was secured through the use of peer reviews and member checks. Transferability involves the ability to apply the findings to similar groups. In this study, rich descriptions of the departments from which these participants came can support potential transferability of findings. Dependability is the expression of variability in the study and the researchers used an audit trail to document the decisions made throughout data collection and analysis. Use of the coding and re-coding process further established this measure. Confirmability is evidenced by the lack of researcher bias. The use of subjectivity statements provided the first line of defense, followed by the use of an expert panel, member checks and an audit trail.

Qualitative studies rely on purposive, or criterion-based sampling for the insight it brings to the study (Ary et al., 2002). In this case, the participants needed to have considerable experience with the phenomenon. The research team worked with an expert panel, consisting of five agricultural education university faculty, to identify an appropriate sample of schools. Since motivation is born through activity (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005), the panel recommended including student participants from schools with strong agriculture programs. Given the unique three-circle structure of agricultural education, the schools selected provided stability and a variety of opportunities for student engagement yet still struggled with apathetic student populations. The expert panel characterized such programs as having: (1) the majority of their teachers being established in the program, (2) a variety of coursework in three or more pathways, (3) a record of participation in a wide variety of Career Development Events (CDEs), (4) a record of a variety of SAE opportunities, and (5) a record of teacher participation in the California Agricultural Teachers' Association. A peer committee identified and approved potential participant schools of similar department size and make-up. The researchers initiated email correspondence with schools located in the San Joaquin Region, each within a one-hour drive from the farthest points. Four schools agreed to participate.

[School A] is a fairly new campus on the outskirts of the community. While much of the city's business is agriculturally related, the students served primarily have urban addresses. The school's ethnic breakdown primarily includes: 86% Hispanic and 7% Caucasian (Ed-Data, 2012b). California Agricultural Education data (California Department of Education, 2012a) indicates the presence of seven full-time agriculture teachers serving 610 unduplicated students, with those enrolled in the program having completed an average of 1.9 years of agriculture coursework. The program offers 35 sections of coursework: 13 Agricultural Mechanics, 11 Agriscience, 6 Horticulture/Plant Science, 2 Animal Science, 2 Ag Business Management and 1 other. [School A] is also on a seven period day with each class lasting 56 minutes. There are 16 students per computer and 108 classrooms have Internet access. Seven students took part in the study, referred to as: Martino, Carlos, Jorge, Veronica, Tim, Cruz and Diego.

[School B], located seventeen miles north of [School A], is found in California's number one agricultural producing county. While the school is located in a rural setting, it serves students from both rural and urban environments. The school's largest ethnic groups include: 48.8% Hispanic, 21.5% Caucasian, 15.4% Asian, and 10.3% African American (California's Department of Education, 2012b). The school consists of two campuses and freshmen have the choice to remain on the campus with the agriculture program or move to the other campus. Busses run

between campuses for students who wish to attend classes at both. Class periods run on an alternating block schedule with A and B days. Each class period is 90 minutes. California Ag Ed data (California Department of Education, 2012a) indicates [School B] has seven full-time agriculture teachers serving 782 unduplicated students. Students enrolled in the program have completed an average of 1.6 years. The program offers 41 sections of coursework: 14 Agricultural Mechanics, 12 Agriscience, 5 Horticulture/Plant Science, 5 other, 3 Animal Science, and 2 Ag Business Management. Technology data indicates 13.4 students per computer and 84 classrooms with Internet access. Seven students chose to participate in the study and are referred to as: Hannah, Roger, Grant, Roberto, Jacob, Aaron and Phillip.

[School C] is in a rural community, located 41 miles to the southwest of [School B]. This agriculture program maintains one FFA chapter yet serves three separate high schools. Teachers are assigned to a different school and spent much of the school day teaching at different campuses. On average, the ethnic breakdown of these schools includes 52.6% Hispanic, 31.9% Caucasian and 5.6% African American (California Department of Education, 2012b). The seven period day holds 50 minute classes. California Ag Ed data (California Department of Education, 2012a) indicate seven full-time teachers in agriculture serving an unduplicated enrollment of 1,054. The average completion rate for students in the agriculture program is 1.7 years. The program offers 41 sections of coursework: 15 Agriscience, 13 Agricultural Mechanics, 7 Horticulture/Plant Science, and 6 Animal Science. Eight students took part in the study, referred to as: Jason, Charlie, Mary, Hector, Antoine, Desmond, Jeremy and Miguel.

[School D] is 26 miles south of [School C] and is a leading agricultural city in the state. This program also has one agriculture program serving three comprehensive high schools in the district. Students are bussed throughout the day to one location housing the agricultural program. The district has a rotating block schedule of six periods, with students completing one set of classes one day and the other set the next. The bell schedules include three classes daily at 120 minutes each and the schedule varies by school site. This challenge, combined with bussing students from around town, makes it difficult for teachers to present a traditional lesson but teachers and students have adapted. The largest ethnic representation at these schools includes: 68.8% Hispanic, 23.7 Caucasian and 3.8% African American (California Department of Education, 2012b). California Ag Ed data (California Department of Education, 2012a) indicate seven full-time agriculture teachers serving 822 unduplicated students who remain in the program an average of 1.8 years. There are 34 sections of coursework offered: 16 Agriscience, 9 Agricultural Mechanics, 4 Animal Science, 3 Horticulture/Plant Science, and 2 Ag Business. The site also has an operational commercial dairy on which students are employed. Ten students participated in the study, referred to as: Chris, Beth, Justin, Ashley, Abbey, Laura, Elise, Anthony, Matthew, and Ben.

The researchers communicated with school administration to secure proper approvals and worked with site agriculture teachers in the selection of student participants. Teachers were instructed to identify fifteen students who had expressed neutral behaviors in the academic setting and would offer their perspectives on the phenomenon. All of the participants had experience with student apathy as a student in the secondary setting. Teachers provided these students with permission slips and, once they secured documentation, the researchers scheduled interviews.

The research team met with the student groups from four agricultural education departments, with no more than ten students in attendance at each meeting. Of the total 32 participants, males represented 75% of the pool with 56% of total participants characterizing themselves as white, 38% as Hispanic and 6% as other. The majority of participants were in their junior year of high school (43%), followed by 28% freshmen, 16% seniors, and 13% sophomores.

Focus group interviews at the individual school sites were used to collect data from the adolescent participants. On-site interviews have the potential to diffuse the perceived power of the researcher in the room and help groups share and develop their own ideas about a phenomenon (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). The school setting was critical to collecting data because

of the safe, familiar, meaningful surroundings. Participants were not provided with a definition of student apathy, rather the researchers followed an expert panel reviewed interview protocol to draw out understandings. Students were welcomed and informed they had been nominated by their teachers to share on behalf of their programs. Broad, open-ended questions aimed to capture participant experiences concerning the typical teaching and learning environment, their perceptions of their performance relative to expectations, as well as how they cope with feelings related to the phenomenon across the academic landscape. Each interview lasted one hour, was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and later subjected to classical phenomenological thematic analysis (Grbich, 2007).

Data analysis began with a fresh review of researcher subjectivity statements to reflect on personal assumptions. The goal of such efforts was to remain open solely to participant experiences with the phenomenon. Transcripts were provided to participants for accuracy checks and all collected data was read, including transcripts, participant corrections, and field notes. Relevant experiences were highlighted and formulated into themes. These connected themes expressed the detailed participant experiences with student apathy.

Central themes were also reviewed to establish abstract or interpretive themes. This perspective involved participant narrative, researcher experience and related literature to express the abstract principles leading to the construction of the student apathy phenomenon.

Findings

The following question guided the research: What is the experience of secondary agriculture students with apathy in their academic environments? Representative samples of verbatim participant quotes provided rich details resulting in a clearer image relative to student apathy. The findings are divided into three sections. *Participant understandings* details the collection of experiences shared with the research team. *Picture of student apathy* designates a fresh description of the phenomenon. *Student apathy defined* condenses the phenomenon into a concise statement.

Participant Understandings

The student participants in this study largely characterized themselves much like Chris, “I am hardworking and responsible. I turn in all of my work and I try as best as I can.” Many admitted they spend a lot of instructional time talking with friends but generally work to complete their assignments during class time. “I am a fast learner. Depending on the kids I’m with, I talk a lot in class. Most teachers know me. I get my work done” (Carlos). Roger added, “I know when to stop because if you don’t stop, you’re going to get in trouble.” While most claimed to work on assignments during class time, turning in homework was not a priority. “I don’t do homework at all. ...I think teachers think because we are teenagers we don’t have anything going on in our lives” (Juan). Procrastination relative to completing and turning in homework was common. “I’m hardworking but I procrastinate too much. The quality is fine but I just wait until the last minute” (Beth).

Despite believing themselves to be good students, many participants were careful to add they often “check out” when teachers use lecture as the main method of instruction. “If it is in a boring way, I’m just going to nod off and not care about what the material is, whether I like the class or not. With me, it means I’m going to turn away, not really pay attention, not participate. Just not do anything about it” (Grant).

These depictions of self closely mirrored the responsibilities participants believed students bear as members of the teaching-learning equation. Participants across the board agreed it was their duty to be in class, arrive prepared, exhibit good behavior, pay attention, and complete their work. Veronica said,

Teachers don't want to waste their time with someone who doesn't care about their grade. Their job is to teach you. If you're not paying attention or not doing your work, they aren't going to waste their time grading something you didn't try on. It is my responsibility to come to class. When you miss out, it is hard to catch up. Pay attention and do your work.

Doing one's own work was also of great importance. "I like to think of school as being the place where you show that you've learned it" (Jacob). Tim added, "I think it is the student's responsibility... to actually do the work and not copy off someone else."

When contrasting perceived student responsibilities with perceived teacher responsibilities, affective factors were as critical as technical skill. According to participants, a teacher's role is to teach, explain, help, be prepared and treat students equally. "I always feel like teachers that ask students a lot of questions is a really good thing because not only are they teaching the material, they're going back and checking to make sure the students are actually learning," (Jacob). Aaron felt classroom management was critical, stating, "I think they need to have the students learn instead of just talk the whole time." Hannah mentioned off-task chatter had an increasingly detrimental effect on her performance. "If I can't hear, then I don't know what is going on. So, there's no point in trying to do anything." Hannah felt the use of a warm up activity at the beginning of class was important as well and added, "They should get everyone involved." Grant agreed sharing, "When they do those PowerPoints, they need to offer fill-in-the-blank notes to help me remember things." Differentiation was discussed in a number of contexts.

The way she teaches could be good for a majority of students but there is a group who maybe doesn't get it. Then, maybe she needs to figure out a way to make it (content) available for everyone to figure out what's going on and grasp concepts, instead of trying to teach us the same way over and over again (Jason).

Phillip offered, "The teacher has his/her own responsibility to make sure every student is passing. And if they're not passing, at least take some time out of the day to give them a push in the right direction."

From an emotional standpoint, students appreciated being treated respectfully. Participants in each school admitted sensing negativity and hostility from teachers. Justin, shared, "Teachers should not get mad when we don't understand stuff," with Cruz adding, "and not treat us like little kids." Beth and Ashley felt understanding and patience were critical teacher responsibilities. Participants at School D, found certain core academic teachers to be difficult to get along with, calling one in particular a "jerk" (Justin). Teachers should make every effort to connect with students and make the classroom environment enjoyable. Jorge described this through the following experience, "Some teachers don't even teach that subject but still offer to help so you can get a passing grade." Martino added, "I think they need to be themselves too."

Having spent considerable time in the public school environment, participants had personal encounters with apathy. The majority of examples were connected to core academic courses each had taken. Students claimed to check out because lecture was the default teaching method and they often perceived themselves as unsuccessful. Miguel said, "My problem is with history. It puts me to sleep. It's really not that interesting sometimes. I just think, 'When is this class going to be over?' The teacher talks a lot." Antoine shared,

I bust my butt doing it (math), trying it, and I still don't get it. She gives me examples, tries to help me but it doesn't come that easy. Sometimes I just say, 'Whatever. I'm not doing this.' I just put my head down and wait until class is over.

Martino's experience was very similar.

I zone out. I pay attention and if I know I don't get it, I'll raise my hand. And if I still don't get it, I'll ask. But if I look at it and know that I'll need more time, even going to the teacher won't help, and then I give up. I'll just pick up the basics of it.

Cruz offered another experience.

They make you write a lot. ...I'll just stop. I'll still pay attention but I won't write. I'll keep it in my head. But once we have to turn in papers, I'll say my hand started to hurt and teachers get mad.

For this group, student apathy often grew from learning experiences where purpose or relevance was not adequately established in the lesson.

There is a kid in my math class that asks every single lesson, 'How is this going to help me in the future?' Nine times out of ten, the teacher answers, 'Well, you never know.' It just frustrates everybody in that class. Most of us aren't going to be mathematicians when we grow up, so why are we doing this? What is it going to do for us?

The participants' most powerful recollections were associated with their belief the school pushes an agenda unrepresentative of their professional goals. Martino said, "If you can do general math, that's all you need. I understand other jobs you might need more than that. But if you are not going to do that job, they shouldn't make you take it." Grant continued,

It's one of these things where I'm not planning to go to this fancy university. That's not my dream. You get told to do this, strive for a university. Well, I don't want to go to a university. It makes it seem like I'm not striving for what they want. They (the school) want everyone to say they're going to a university, do as great as you can always. I look at this and I think, there's no point. Why strive for university level if you're not going to go?

Picture of Student Apathy

Based on the participants' shared experiences, a visual of student apathy through the eyes of secondary agriculture students, was crafted. The phenomenon of student apathy begins with the conscious choice students make in an effort to shield themselves from the uncertainty of risk and the unpleasantness of failure. Grant said,

I kind of see it like a choice because I could easily say, 'screw whatever I have for the rest of the day' and do the work for that class but I don't. I do whatever I want to do. And the fact that the class isn't the most difficult class in the world, it's actually one of the easiest ones, and I'm still not doing the work... It feels bad.

A student's confidence is constantly under attack in the formal academic setting. Barraged with humiliation and negativity, they tuck in, choosing to disengage. This defense mechanism insulates them from what they perceive others believe about them.

You know the answer so you raise your hand. But you have the smartest kid in the class next to you who raises his hand and the teacher picks him instead. They think because you don't raise your hand often, you don't know the answer (Carlos).

Jorge continued, "Or you are just sitting there. Everyone has their hands up and they automatically pick on you so they can embarrass you." Chris stated, "It'll ruin my whole day if I choke in class or my teacher is in a bad mood. I just don't feel like doing anything. The rest of the day I don't really care anymore."

Discouragement becomes commonplace and students do not possess the skills to pull themselves from the mental state. They allow low grades, tracking, and poor attitudes to maintain their stronghold. Jacob shared, "For me, after a while I just give up." Over time, the choice for apathy becomes habit. This results in the degradation of students' confidence in their ability to achieve. "Me and numbers don't get along at all. I sit there and try but eventually you lose. You just sit there," said Jason. Students remaining in a state of doubt and fear become unable to process on their own. "I always like other people's opinions. I ask people and they give me answers. I'll do whatever they say. I can't think for myself. I always want to try and make the right decision" (Roger). He also admitted, "I kind of need someone (parents) yelling at me, telling me to do my work, and then I'll do it." Eventually, habitual disengagement places

students on the fringe of the academic environment, rather than fully engaging with it. “I have gotten lazier and it hurts my grade in the end. It hurts where I go... because at this point, I don’t qualify for a four year university” (Diego).

Student apathy can be demonstrated through quiet and disruptive means. It looks like poor class attendance, achieved by leaving campus without proper documentation or merely hiding out in other teachers’ classrooms during instructional time. It looks like failing to follow established class norms, including: culture, expectations, and routines. It involves internalizing responses to teacher checks for understanding, rather than externalizing them through verbal, written or kinesthetic means. It can be displayed through avoidance behavior like frequent restroom breaks, completing minimums, or taking a nap. Ashley offered, “If you walk into a class with a bad attitude, then your teacher is going to know that you don’t want to be there and you don’t really care about the class. They’ll probably leave you alone.”

Student Apathy Defined

Based on participant experiences, student apathy rises from a number of factors including:

- (1) **A lack of caring on the part of the student.** “They don’t care about what they look like or what the teacher thinks about them. They just care about, ‘Whatever, it’s a class and I will get through to the next one’” (Mary).
- (2) **A lack of caring on the part of the teacher.** “The teacher doesn’t really care.” (Hannah)
- (3) **Exclusion of student learning as an instructional priority.** “They (teachers) slouch more than the students sometimes” (Jorge). This is communicated by policies which do not permit late work being turned in. “The work that we do, we actually spent time doing it. When we turn it in, they don’t want to accept it” (Carlos). “Droning on” during class time without including more active learning strategies continues to make students feel unwelcome in the learning environment. “What she (geometry teacher) would do is write the problem, give one example and go through it very quickly. Then she would give us the assignment right away” (Cruz).
- (4) **Student inability to learn or demonstrate learning in a way they prefer or are successful.** “I get tired of the whole writing thing. If I could do some hands-on and get graded off of that, I think I could pass a lot faster and do a lot better. I’m more of a hands-on guy” (Phillip).
- (5) **Miscommunication about what constitutes learning.** “That’s where some students get overwhelmed. You get to that point where you memorize it all and you start to get confused” (Aaron).
- (6) **Favoritism and elitism.**

Instead of having an even distribution of good and bad kids, you get a class of the good kids and a class of the bad kids. I think that is a really bad idea. If you have a class with half of each, and the teacher makes them work with their peers then you will have all of the good kids helping to motivate the bad kids. You get a really nice outcome (Jacob).

Grant elaborated, “When you’re in a classroom with a bunch of idiots and jerks who do a bunch of stupid stuff in class then you have an issue. It is the worst possible thing in the world.”

To summarize, student apathy is defined as a conscious choice often occurring when students perceive teachers as creating an inhospitable learning environment that communicates a lack of caring and fails to make student learning a high priority.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Student apathy is a complex phenomenon involving a number of stakeholders. Waning levels of student enthusiasm and participation in the classroom have many teachers, administrators and parents concerned. Participants in these adolescent focus groups classify student apathy as a choice made day-by-day, class-by-class; involving the decision of whether or not to extend themselves and their efforts. The decision toward apathy is personal yet learners take no pride in their insignificant contributions and negligible performances. Rather, they suppress intrinsic motivation to interact in the academic interface, electing to protect their fragile egos from potential harm. A fear of failure wins every time.

Students

Students are the gatekeepers to their personal behavior (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005). They decide whether the risks associated with involvement outweigh the opportunities for success (Fisher, 2005). Students must be encouraged to practice personal responsibility early and often in their academic and personal lives. Keeping track of assignments, grades, activities and even SAE records are ways to begin.

Students must communicate regularly with parents surrounding their academic performance (Hwang, 1995). Many participants admitted feelings of guilt when their parents discovered their failing grades. Teachers can provide the students with tools to initiate conversations as a first step toward empowering students to assume responsibility for their actions. The use of home visits can build positive relationships among the student, the family, and the teacher. By opening more lines of communication, parents are placed in a coaching role to help their students work through individual obstacles and develop plans for personal improvement.

Teachers

Secondary agriculture teachers hold a great deal of power related to student apathy and the potential impact of an agriculture program can be substantial. The 32 participants represented four agriculture programs with a total enrollment of 3,268 students. According to their experiences, they struggled with the impersonal, purposeless, teacher-centered focus of the core academic programs on campus (Littlejohn, 2008) yet felt they thrived in the personal, purposeful, student-centered focus of the agriculture programs (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). With initiatives such as STEM and Common Core redefining school structures, the secondary setting must be examined holistically to identify how schools can best serve these learners. Agriculture teachers must take notice of how students perceive the academic environment of core classes and work to ensure agriculture classes do not follow suit. Students carry apathetic behaviors and attitudes with them throughout the day and may require additional attention to pull them from their downward spirals toward participation. By assisting in the planning and facilitation of campus professional development with colleagues, agriculture teachers can share their insight and expertise for student engagement.

Teachers who communicate anything less than a sincere interest in the success of each learner fail to connect students with the learning environment (Phipps et al., 2008; Thompson, 2008; van Uden et al., 2013). Students crave personal connections with their teachers. Being transparent allows students to get to know their teachers as people. It also lays the foundation for a caring, less stressful environment with the potential for greater learning (Reschly et al., 2008). These opportunities can also more closely align the beliefs teachers and learners have about the educational experience. Offering personal invitations for involvement in departmental activities and celebrating with students in class daily can begin establishing stronger personal bonds.

Teacher should welcome them to the learning environment, invite them to enjoy learning and help them view their progress as success. This attitudinal shift can help lower the defenses so many learners keep raised (Fisher, 2005; Phipps et al., 2008). Once students know their teachers care and that their learning matters, they feel ready to engage.

Mediocre teaching methods, archaic assessment and the absence of purposeful learning fail to connect students with content (Hwang, 1995; Littlejohn, 2008). Teachers need to empower their learners (Schunk, 2004). Although teachers are under great pressure to teach for state accountability measures, soft skills must be infused within the curriculum. This can help build student confidence and responsibility, and their ability to cope in stressful situations (Fisher, 2005; Littlejohn, 2008). Teachers must involve students in their learning and establish the purpose for doing so, while holding students accountable (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Hwang, 1995). Active strategies like SAE, project based learning, whole class discussion, laboratories, etc., engage students in actions like exploration and discovery (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005). Today's learners live in a connected, technology-driven world yet are expected to receive content and demonstrate understanding through written means. Teachers must utilize technology to engage their students and reach them in the mode with which they are most comfortable and proficient. These methods do require more time in planning and preparation but the outcome is undeniable.

Students in the study understood their agriculture teachers are busy yet were able to track them down outside of class time for additional help. It is recommended teachers continue to make a concerted effort to be available to students before school, at breaks or after school. A significant source of frustration for most of the participant groups dealt with their perceptions of success being beyond their reach. While Hassel & Lourey (2005) argued post-secondary educators should hold students to specific deadlines, many secondary students may not be ready for such strict policies. Teachers must make success possible by reconsidering their philosophies regarding late assignments and guide students toward mastery. Is the important element the timetable or is it engagement and completion?

School Leadership

The obvious student grouping or tracking within the school was problematic for participants. The practice of placing *good students* in one class and *bad students* in another, humiliated, at one time or another, the students in the study. They felt labeled and ostracized. Mixed ability classes have the potential to help schools raise their academic scores. More capable, focused learners in the class can work with teachers to co-teach learners in need of additional help and accountability.

The students also felt as though the school had an agenda contrary to their own. As a result, their sense of separation from the larger school community was reinforced. A cultural shift involving the adoption of a *they are all ours* mentality can help every administrator, faculty and staff member understand their potential to reach out to all learners. Rather than the insistence in preparing all students for a four-year university, more must be accomplished to identify individual student and family goals to better tailor the education for the learner (Schunk, 2004).

Teacher Educators

Learners in the study were at the point of being offended by the use of teacher-centered approaches to lesson delivery. Many vocalized the need for variety in the manner by which teachers facilitated and assessed instruction. Teacher educators have a wonderful opportunity to influence teacher candidates' teaching. It is recommended teacher educators go beyond merely presenting teaching methods and model them in the pre-service program. Seeing these methods in action while experiencing them as learners, may force a shift in current practice. Reinforcing

the idea of assessing early, often, and through different ways must be repeated throughout the pre-service program to get candidates comfortable doing so.

Teacher educators need to also communicate the purpose behind teacher performance expectations and dispositions, providing both meaning and practical evidence (Thompson, 2008). The lack of expression seen in many classrooms may have something to do with a lack of understanding. Those serving in supervisory roles for teacher candidates must insist on the establishment of an anticipatory set and purpose statement at the beginning of each lesson and unit, with the thread carried to the end. If students' interest is not activated and they feel the content has no relevance, why should they feel compelled to engage (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005)? Pre-service teachers must begin to ask themselves this question for every lesson they plan.

Teacher educators need to continue the conversation with teachers through their professional associations. In-service education focused on identifying, preventing and mitigating student apathy must be a priority. The strategies participants mentioned as being favorable to their learning need to be the emphasis. It is also important to encourage programs to emulate those qualities of strong programs used to guide the selection of schools featured in the study. Those that do, provide more options for student engagement (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005).

Many of the recommendations made require little additional effort but certainly require purposeful action. Based on the definition of student apathy, teachers have a responsibility to make the students' choice toward apathy, difficult. Through implementation, the formal academic environment has the potential to speak to the very gaps students have identified. It also responds directly to the National Research Agenda's priority to engage student learners (Doerfert, 2011). Additional research is desired to further grow this young depiction of student apathy. How do secondary agriculture teachers encounter and describe it? What about the impact it has on those teaching candidates infiltrating schools for the student teaching experience? What does student apathy look like in struggling agriculture programs? Student apathy may never be obliterated but perhaps it can be made to run.

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