

# Setting the Stage for *Realizing the Potential of Learning in Middle Adolescence*

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*Studies have characterized students—high school students in particular—as bored, staring out classroom windows, counting the seconds for the bell to ring, and being pervasively disengaged from the learning process.<sup>i</sup> According to a recent study on student engagement by Steinberg, Brown, and Dornbusch,<sup>ii</sup> 50% of students reported that their classes were boring, and up to one-third reported that they survived their school day by “goofing off” with their friends.<sup>iii</sup>*

Today’s schools continue to mirror that description despite many efforts by educators, researchers, and concerned parents to alter them.<sup>iv</sup> Faced with this dismal fact, it is easy to assume that the existing features of schooling are the natural, inevitable order of things, or to blame educators for this intractable condition. But that response distracts us from accurately identifying the true causes of these conditions and deprives us of the possibilities for change. The real culprit in producing and maintaining this environment of boredom in schools is a perverse, prevailing paradigm<sup>v</sup> of learning in our schools, a paradigm we might label the Mental Model. The Mental Model<sup>vi</sup> currently dominant in our schools guides individual educators, policy makers, and citizens [all of us] in the everyday conduct of today’s typical American secondary educational institutions.

Many of these features of schooling have existed for a long time in educational settings and are directly challenged by the principles of learning outlined in the paper. For example, typical instructional practices underway in American classrooms now involve students listening to a teacher talk, with little emphasis on students expressing their own thinking. Education is often equated with students doing seatwork, not taking actions guided by their own questions; and students taking tests that are not much different than their seatwork, largely involving giving short answer responses to questions that required only the memorization of facts. Students seldom assess theirs and other’s work actively, as adults do in today’s creative work settings. These features do not serve to motivate and engage students, or promote their learning.<sup>vii</sup> But they do make sense to many because they correspond to the dominant Mental Model that we have long implemented in our schools. It is the way we have always done education, and it feels normal. But it does not work today, if it ever did.

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Understanding the Mental Model is a critical piece of the puzzle for understanding the persistence of these schooling practices and provides the context for the analysis of why this methodology fails our young people. The paper that follows will focus on alternative and more effective principles of learning, based on the research regarding the developmental progress and capacities of young people, and will provide a broad outline of the steps we need to take to make our schools more compelling learning environments.

The Mental Model, and the consequent inability of our schools to move beyond these guides, is not the fault of particular individuals or schools. That fault belongs to all of us. Just about anyone who has attended schools in the US has this Mental Model instantiated in his or her mind as the proper method of schooling and learning. It guides how they (we) understand and enact what is to be learned and how that learning is to happen with students in educational settings. These guides were unintentionally learned by all of us as we participated in, and experienced, school structures and practices throughout twelve to sixteen or more years of formal schooling.<sup>viii</sup>

Dan Lortie has called these experiences in the practice of schooling in classrooms, and the learning of this Model, an apprenticeship in schooling.<sup>ix</sup> While the apprenticeship framework for learning has many advantages,<sup>x</sup> this particular kind of apprenticeship has its limits, according to Lortie:

*“... [T]here are important limits on the extent to which being a student is like serving an apprenticeship in teaching. First, the student sees the teacher from a specific vantage point; second, the student’s participation is usually imaginary rather than real. The student is the “target” of teacher efforts and sees the teacher from the stage and center lie an audience viewing a play. Students ... are not privy to the teacher’s private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations, or postmortem analyses. Thus they are not pressed to place the teacher’s actions in a pedagogically oriented framework. They are witnesses from their own student-oriented perspectives.”<sup>xi</sup>*

With or without these limits acknowledged, the influence of this strong Mental Model directs the structures and practices in today’s educational settings.

<sup>xii</sup> Even with the best efforts of some teacher and administrator preparation programs striving to do otherwise, this still happens. For example, many prospective teachers, as they enter teacher preparation programs, assume that learning involves “absorbing and memorizing knowledge.” They also visualize their future roles as teachers in their classrooms in Mental Model terms, seeing themselves standing in front of students delivering knowledge.<sup>xiii</sup>

These assumptions are so pervasive and powerful that once graduated from their “normal teacher education” training program and stepping into their first classrooms, these new teachers often adopt this frontal teaching approach as their main pedagogical practice, maintaining it throughout the years of their tenure as teachers. In fact, as we have noted earlier, this is the dominant practice of experienced educators in many classrooms of many schools.<sup>xiv</sup>

As this paper will demonstrate, the Mental Model crashes and burns against the wall of the research evidence discussed later on. We have learned an enormous amount about how young people develop intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Yet, despite these powerful insights, firmly grounded in many years of educational and social science research, we have made little progress towards revising our educational practices to take advantage of this new learning. Efforts to introduce new approaches to our educational programs have often been too little, too late.<sup>xv</sup>

The persistence of the Mental Model and the resulting practices that are derived from and directed by it are what drives the critiques within this paper. The critiques are not directed at particular teachers, principals, or afterschool educators, in any particular educational setting. Nonetheless, we hope that educators and policy makers will agree with us about the weakness of the Mental Model and the consequent classroom and school features that follow from it. We hope that they, too, will concur that the Model requires reconsideration and will seek to change it. In doing that, they will afford themselves opportunities to examine the general features of their programs and particular actions that they may be taking, in light of the principles of learning noted in this paper.

The following principles are not plans for action and do not directly describe practices to be undertaken. Instead, they lay out an alternative view, generalizations, a new promise of education, if you will, that provides guides for creating new actions and educational structures in particular educational settings. However, the specific actions to be undertaken must be invented<sup>xvi</sup> by those who embrace, and want to use, the principles in their own educational setting.

Poverty and minority status have consistently demonstrated a negative relationship to student success with status quo educational practices and structures. As the student demographics continue to change and intensify in the directions they are headed, educational institutions that maintain the predictable practices and structures of learning will be even less able to encourage student learning. They do not yield powerful and positive consequences outside of and beyond high school for the heterogeneous

students who attend schools today. In the future, if the persistent model and practices prevail, our future citizens and our society will be at risk.<sup>xvii</sup>

These facts alone should provide the basis for intense efforts to rethink and redesign educational structures. Embracing the Principles of Learning, as guides for creating new thoughts and actions in educational settings, will more likely propel youth's learning and development. Promoting and providing the knowledge base to support and encourage these changes is the purpose of this paper and the principles of learning that follow from it.

## Endnotes

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