

UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM MOTIVATION AMONG ADOLESCENT HISPANIC MALES

Floralba Arbelo Marrero and Maria Aguirre Castells

Albizu University

Abstract This action research study explored adolescent Hispanic male perceptions of classroom motivation in learning. As educators, we struggle to engage young males in the education process, so we decided to ask Hispanic adolescent males what could increase their motivation and engagement in the classroom and learning process. Ten Hispanic male adolescents were interviewed to understand what motivated them in the classroom. They completed a short demographic survey and interview protocol; transcription data was coded and analyzed using the constant comparison method. Findings indicated that a motivated teacher, student decision-making, interesting and relevant topics, the future, and classroom engagement are sources of motivation in the classroom for Hispanic adolescent males. Using these findings, we developed a short questionnaire and survey to integrate in the classroom at the beginning and middle of the school year to best design teaching strategies and activities that would best serve our student population.

Keywords: motivation, Hispanic adolescent boys, student achievement, classroom environment, Hispanic, action research, teacher action research

Introduction

Fostering creative and engaging learning environments can be a challenge for educators with unmotivated students. While the literature informs us of how to develop motivating learning environments for students (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015), we were interested in learning how adolescent Hispanic males described their own motivation to learn in the classroom. Hispanic male achievement has been identified as a critical topic of research and inquiry due to low educational attainment rates, low achievement scores in reading and writing, their overrepresentation in special education tracks, and referrals to juvenile detention agencies (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Schott, 2015). Prior research asserts that a student's level of motivation is not only dependent upon intrapersonal factors, such as

innate characteristics, but also upon the learning environments in which they develop and build academic competencies (Guay, 2016).

Culture and context also provide a sense of belonging for students and help to increase their motivation for learning; these environments can be developed with careful attention to student attributes, needs, interests, classroom climate, as well as cultural context. Therefore teachers should be pedagogically aware to inspire students in the learning process. This action research study was developed to identify teacher behaviors and classroom teaching strategies that motivate adolescent Hispanic males to increase academic performance and contribute suggestions to accomplish this. Noting that many of our young Hispanic males were struggling with their schoolwork and seemed less motivated than their Hispanic female counterparts, we wanted to understand what learning activities and teacher behaviors might increase male classroom engagement in the learning process. Furthermore, data suggests a decrease in Hispanic male academic performance in the last decade. Hispanic males below age 18 are the largest segment of the U.S. Hispanic population, thus supporting the importance of this research (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013; Schott, 2015).

Literature Review

As educators, we have experienced the direct link between the support and care that family has on youth and their educational attainment (Arbelo-Marrero, 2016; Poza, Brooks, & Valdez, 2014; Woolley, 2009); yet research also demonstrates that support and relationships in the classroom, and school environment also impact student learning and motivation for all students, including minority boys (Guay, 2016; Orthner et al., 2010; Super, 2014). Healthy teacher student relationships are beneficial to educational performance and increase student motivation to learn (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Wubbels et al., 2016). Motivation drawn from positive teacher student relationships sustains a desire to learn over time which positively affects achievement (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Unfortunately, data points toward a downward spiral in educational attainment among African-American and Latino males (Schott, 2015), and high school completion among Hispanic students are lower than other ethnic groups (Carpi, Darcy, Falconer, Boyd, & Lents, 2013; Lesaux & Rangel, 2013).

For educators it is imperative to understand what inspires adolescents to achieve to better support their school success, especially among underperforming populations. Late elementary and middle school are transitional times in the life of the adolescent; changes in their bodies, expectations from parents and teachers increase, and they struggle as they leave childhood behind them. During this transition, the motivation for learning has the potential to decline (Dent & Koenka, 2016). For boys, the development of self-regulation and the physical constraints of remaining seated throughout the day and listening to lectures can be challenging and they may struggle to develop these behaviors (Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, & Murphy, 2007; Steinberg, 2005). Gurian (2011) asserts that using

storyboards, graphics, granting autonomy is assignment selection, and same gender project groups have been found helpful in stimulating learning motivation among boys. As educators it is imperative to understand what inspires adolescents to achieve in order to support their success. Through years of interacting and teaching children of all ages, we believe that motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, is the foundation for all learning. It was with this in mind that we developed this action research project.

Methodology

This action research plan included identifying an area of focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and action planning (Mills, 2014). Since we sought to understand the perceptions of Hispanic adolescent boys' motivation in the classroom, one-on-one interview protocol seemed most appropriate for our purposes. The overarching research question was: What motivates adolescent boys to learn in the classroom?

The intent of the study was for the students to inform us of the types of behaviors and activities they believed help to motivate them in the learning process, specifically in the classroom context. The interview questions addressed the students' ideas about their classroom environment, teachers, and also prompted for a reflection of their own motivation in learning.

There were ten male participants between the ages of 11 and 14 recruited from two public schools in southeastern Florida. Parental consent forms were developed to advise parents about the study, how it would be conducted, and what the results would be used for in order to seek their permission to allow their sons to participate in this project. Once parental and participant assent was secured, an individual meeting was conducted with each participant, a brief yet thorough explanation of the intent for this study was provided to them, and any questions they may have had were answered.

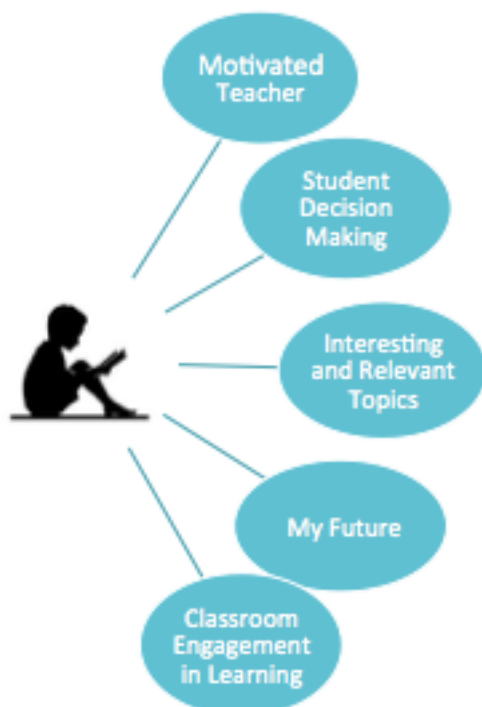
Seven interview questions were developed specifically prompting responses on different areas of motivation such as the classroom climate, the teacher, methods of motivation and self-reflection. All questions were open-ended allowing the student to express himself as needed (see Table 1). The final question simply asked if there were any other comments they would like to share. The reason behind this type of question was to give the student the opportunity to share anything they felt was appropriate without the pressure of focusing on a particular question.

Table 1: Interview Questions: What motivates you to learn in the classroom?

1. What motivates you to learn new things?
2. How have your teachers motivated and inspired you to learn?
3. What part of learning new ideas and things do you enjoy most?
4. What do you think a motivated classroom might be like?
5. What is it about a classroom environment that sparks your interest in learning?
6. Do you think you are a motivated student? Why or why not?
7. Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

Once an interview took place, data was transcribed within 24 to 48 hours of recording, and initial coding then took place. Specifically, line-by-line initial coding was used as it is more suitable for interview transcripts; highlighters marked salient words and ideas across data transcriptions (Figure 2). Annotations were made in the margins during the second round of coding which was descriptive; notes were formulated on separate index cards identifying major themes that emerged from the coding and constant comparison data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2015). Comparing descriptions, words, and ideas across transcripts allowed us to determine the major themes across the data.

Figure 1: Five Themes: What Motivates Adolescent Hispanic Boys to Learn in the Classroom



Results

Figure 1 shows the thematic units that emerged from the analysis of the data on what motivates Hispanic adolescent males to learn in the classroom. Upon careful interpretation and transcription of the data collected in the student interviews, certain topics became bold and salient, these were: a motivated teacher, student decision-making, interesting and relevant topics, the future, and classroom engagement. Figure 2 shows main ideas that emerged from the student responses. A motivated teacher: It was clear that each participant valued the importance of a caring teacher; one who is interested in student academic success, took time to help students overcome challenging academic content, and demonstrated enthusiasm for learning. A motivated teacher was a crucial element in the learning process. Participants expressed that an enthusiastic teacher set the mood for learning and possesses the ability to grab students' attention and interest for school. The majority of the participants preferred to learn in a calm, organized, and interactive environment where the teacher is readily available and interested in answering their questions and guiding them along. Student decision making: many of the adolescent boys asserted that being able to choose among different projects, assignments, and assessments would be helpful. Allowing students to choose between assignments is motivating and engaging. This included allowing them to decide whether they would like to participate in a group project or complete an alternative assignment on their own. Democratic classroom environments that considered the boys' ideas meaningful and that provided some self-determination in the context of assignments and assessments were, they asserted, a motivating factor in the classroom.

Figure 2. Main Ideas that Emerged for Each Question

<p>What motivates you to learn new things?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning for the future • Interesting topics motivate me • Gaining knowledge 	<p>How have your teachers motivated you to learn?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping me in the classroom when I don't understand something • By showing enthusiasm when they are teaching 	<p>What part of learning new things do you enjoy most?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intriguing information • Different tactics used to help me learn • Being able to help others because of what I learn • The knowledge itself
<p>What do you think a motivated classroom might be like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivated teacher • Motivated kids • Good behavior • Learning is ongoing • Attention grabbing tactics 	<p>What is it about a classroom environment that sparks your interest in learning?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher • Kids • Learning new ideas • Resources for learning • Classroom environment 	<p>Do you think you are a motivated student? Why or Why not?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No, because I don't like learning. • No, because I think school is boring. • Yes, I push myself, ask questions, attend school regularly. • Yes, I don't give up and want to graduate. • Yes, I am always ready to learn, I apply myself. • Yes, I push myself, I ask questions, and take notes.

Interesting and relevant topics: a common answer that emerged from the question that asked what part of learning new things each enjoyed was that they simply enjoy learning new and interesting things. Participants expressed that learning new ideas, topics, and information presented to them in a manner that they can relate to, created a more engaging classroom environment. The important point here is that knowledge presented in a relevant manner to these young males facilitates the learning process for them. The future: participants also mentioned a desire for learning new academic content and ideas is anchored on a vision of future success; for example, to be college and career ready. Through the interview process, they also conveyed that completing their education was necessary for future employment options. Classroom engagement in learning: most of the participants mentioned that differentiated instructional strategies (e.g. classroom experiments, hands on activities and projects, and simply learning concepts in multiple perspectives) sparked their motivation. Visual displays of useful information such as posters they themselves collaborated to create and the use of technology were stated as resources that sparked their interest in learning.

Surprisingly, all but one participant indicated that they believed they were motivated students. They attributed that teacher enthusiasm, their own readiness and willingness to learn, desire for knowledge, and drive for future success as motivating factors. One participant stated that his motivation to learn was parental influence. He did not want to disappoint his parents, and therefore was compelled to thoroughly complete his

assignments. The last interview question was optional, as it only asked if there were any other comments they would like to share. In response to the final question, three out of the ten participants volunteered some extra information. One attributed the lack of motivation to only caring about being popular in school and not being interested in coursework. Another participant contributed that motivation was different for everyone. The other participant offered a suggestion, "Don't keep it inside and don't be afraid to ask questions about whatever you need." See Appendix C for an interview transcription.

Discussion and Implications

Findings indicate that educators should possess the characteristics of flexibility, compassion, and dedication. Teachers should be inclusive and student centered in their planning, permitting students to provide input in the curricular development and assessment process. This has the potential to help students foster a sense of ownership in learning, which may potentially increase their motivation. This action research study seeks to remind educators that we are accountable for our students' progress, success, and motivation in the classroom; every participant of this study indicated so. Teacher-student relationships are imperative for mutual success. The importance and adaptive value of motivation is directly related to the teacher's own motivation in the classroom (Daniels, 2011). Overall, participants stated that they possessed a desire for learning new things, enjoyed learning with differentiated strategies, longed for the teacher's guidance and support, were aware of the impact of education on future success, and perceived themselves, for the most part, as being motivated students. This study has offered valuable insights into students' attitudes about motivation.

The compilation of data gathered from literature that addressed similar content supports most of these findings (Guay, 2016; Orthner et al., 2010; Super, 2014). One of the most important findings that demonstrated links to existing research was expressed in the Daniels and Pirayoff (2015) study, which states "truly effective teachers combine knowledge about content, pedagogy, and motivation to create learning environments that both allow and encourage students to thrive" (p. 20). Daniels and Pirayoff (2015) encourage teachers to establish rapport and relationships with students that foster motivation. For example, teachers can connect with students at lunchtime, open their classrooms to watch content videos, hold question and answer sessions, or help with homework (Daniels, 2011; Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015).

An action research study should serve a purpose other than data collection. It requires teachers to gain useful insight and reflect upon their own practices to make improvements

for the benefit of the students. This research has led us to develop the following strategies to implement in the classroom:

- Distribute a brief student focused questionnaire providing students with opportunity to answer questions specific to their preferred learning styles, modes of communication, seating, resources, options for assignments, and feedback (Appendix A).
- Have students complete an online survey to collect specific information to better acquaint teachers with their students. (Appendix B).
- Use the information gathered from these questionnaires to foster teacher and student relationships in the classroom in order to increase student motivation and engagement.

Both the online survey and questionnaire are tools we now use for grouping students and creating an engaging classroom climate, which accommodates for individual preferences and learning styles. It is up to the teacher's discretion whether to provide a printed copy of the survey and questionnaire or make them available for online completion.

The benefit of these tools is that they may be re-administered halfway through the school year or the teacher may develop a planned schedule to administer and re-administer to note changes and adjust activities. Opinions change and preferences change; if the student knows the teacher is interested in their learning activities, that alone may be a pivotal point in their learning process. Keeping records of the student's responses and sharing them with parents in a parent-teacher conference can also be quite beneficial. For example, engaging parents in the conversation about what motivates their child, shedding light on a child's interests, and collaborating with parents to discuss learning styles; each supports the student. In addition, the teacher can create a survey for the parents to gain a sense of what the learning environment is at home. This helps to link a child's two most important worlds to best support their achievement. We will begin the next school year with the questionnaire and the survey in order to integrate student ideas and preferences in our teaching practices.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include geographic location and small sample size, which limit the generalizability of the findings. We recommend that future studies include a larger sampling across urban schools and include a parent survey inquiring to the child's behavior and interests outside of school. It would also be helpful to investigate teacher experiences with Hispanic adolescent males from a pedagogical perspective to understand factors of success for this population.

Conclusion

We set out to understand what motivates Hispanic male adolescent learning in the classroom and in the process discovered that they have goals, interests, and aspirations that should be cultivated in the teaching and learning process. Hispanic boys respect and engage with motivated teachers who understand how to include them in curricular decisions that impact their daily learning activities. They desire to be engaged in assignments they enjoy completing without compromising rigor. Boys enjoy interesting and relevant topics that capture their interest and that stimulate creative thinking; learning activities that allow them to demonstrate their strengths and help to develop their academic weaknesses. Adolescent boys are thinking about their futures, they want to make plans and be supported in their endeavors. Engaging Hispanic boys in learning means developing a shared environment where they have a voice in the teaching and learning process.

About the Authors

Floralba Arbelo Marrero, Ed.D. is an assistant professor of education at Albizu University and doctoral faculty chair at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon. She received her doctoral degree in Education from Liberty University in Virginia. Research interests include minority student success, Hispanic Serving Institutions, student retention, and online teaching and learning. Email: farbelo@albizu.edu

Maria Aguirre Castells, M.Ed. is a certified educator in the state of Florida. She works at a K-8 public school teaching reading and language arts in south Florida. Mrs. Aguirre Castells holds a bachelor degree in education from Nova Southeastern University and a master of science in education from Albizu University. Email: marycastells@dadeschools.net

References

- Arbelo-Marrero, F. (2016). Barriers to school success for Latino students. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 5(2), 180 – 186. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Barriers+to+School+Success+for+Latino+Students+Journal+of+Education+and+Learning+Marrero%2c+Floralba+Arbelo+2016&id=EJ1097395>
- Carpi, A., Darcy, R., Falconer, H., Boyd, H., & Lents, N. (2013). Development and implementation of targeted STEM retention strategies at Hispanic-serving institution. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 12(3), 280-299.
- Clark, M. A., Ponjuan, L., Orrock, J., Wilson, T. and Flores, G. (2013). Support and Barriers for Latino Male Students' Educational Pursuits: Perceptions of Counselors and Administrators. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 91, 458–466. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00118.x
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry: Choosing among the five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Daniels, E. (2011). Creating motivating learning environments: Teachers matter. *Middle School Journal*, 43(2), 32-37.
- Daniels, E. & Pirayoff, R. (2015). Relationships matter: Fostering motivation through interactions. *Voices from the Middle*, 23(1), 19-22.
- Dent, A.L. & Koenka, A.C. (2016). The relationship between self-regulated learning and academic achievement across childhood and adolescence: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(3), 425 -474. doi:10.1007/s10648-015-9320-8
- Guay, F. (2016). The virtue of culture in understanding motivation at school: Commentary on the special issue on culture and motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86, 154-160. doi: 10.1111/bjep.12105
- Gurian, M. (2011). *Boys and girls learn differently! : A guide for teachers and parents* (Rev. 10th anniversary ed., 2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2018). Teacher–Student Relationships and L2 Motivation. *Modern Language Journal*, 102(1), 218-241.
- Lesaux, N., & Rangel, J. (2013). How can schools best educate Hispanic students? *Education Next*, 13(2), 50.
- Long, J. F., Monoi, S., Harper, B., Knoblauch, D., & Murphy, K. P. (2007). Academic motivation and achievement among urban adolescents. *Urban Education*, 42(3), 196 – 222.
- Martin, A. J., & Dowson, M. (2009). Interpersonal relationships, motivation, engagement, and achievement: Yields for theory, current issues, and educational practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 327–365.
- Mills, E. M. (2014). *Action Researcher: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* (5th ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Orthner, D. K., Akos, P., Rose, R., Jones-Sanpei, H., Mercado, M. & Woolley, M. E., (2010). CareerStart: A middle school student engagement and academic achievement program. *Children & Schools*, 32, 223 – 234.

- Poza, L., Brooks, M. D., & Valdés, G. (2014). Entre familia: Immigrant parents' strategies for involvement in children's schooling. *School Community Journal*, 24(1), 119-148. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/96513400/entre-familia-immigrant-parents-strategies-involvement-childrens-schooling>.
- Saenz, V. B. & Ponjuan, L. (2009). The vanishing Latino male in higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(1), 54 – 89.
- Saldana, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (3rd ed.)*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2015). *Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 state report on public education and black males*. Retrieved from <http://www.schottfoundation.org/publications-reports/>
- Steinberg, L. (2005). Cognitive and affective development in adolescence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9(2), 69-74.
- Super, J. (2014). Middle School parenting: Graduation is just around the corner. In N. D. Young, C. N. Michael, & editors, *Betwixt and between: Understanding and meeting the social and emotional development needs of students during the Middle School transition years* (pp. 41-54). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Woolley, M. (2009). Supporting school completion among Latino youth: The role of adult relationships. *The Prevention Researcher*, 16(3), 9-12. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ858777>.
- Wubbels, T., Brekelmans, M., Mainhard, T., den Brok, P. J., & van Tartwijk, J. (2016). *Teacher student relationships and student achievement*. In K. R. Wentzel & G. B. Ramani (Eds.), *Handbook of social influences in school contexts: Social-emotional, motivation, and cognitive outcomes* (pp. 127–142). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis

Appendix A: Classroom Learning Engagement Preferences Questionnaire

- Which of the following describes your preferred style for learning?
 - Visual: You prefer using pictures, images, and videos
 - Auditory: You prefer using sound and music
 - Verbal: You prefer using words, both in speech and in writing
 - Physical: You prefer using your body, hands, and sense of touch
 - Logical: You prefer using reasoning, logic, and systems
 - Social: You prefer to learn in groups or with other people
 - Solitary: You prefer to work alone

- In which area of the room do you feel most comfortable in?
 - Towards the front of the class
 - In the center of the class
 - Towards the back of the class
 - I have no preference

- When I am on task, I prefer to sit...
 - Independently
 - With a partner

- How often would you like to discuss your academic progress with your teacher?
 - Once a week
 - Whenever it is necessary
 - I prefer not to discuss my progress
 - I will let the teacher know

- I would like to receive feedback on my assignments
 - I prefer discussing feedback with my teacher
 - I prefer written feedback from my teacher
 - I don't care for feedback from my teacher

- I like using these methods to complete assignments (choose as many as you wish)

- Research Paper
 - Group projects
 - Work independently
 - Hands on presentations and demonstrations
 - Digital presentation
 - Applying art in my assignment (drawing a picture of a cell or neuron)
 - I have no preference, any method is fine
- Is there something specific that you would like to accomplish this school year?
 - How can I help you accomplish this?

Appendix B: Online Survey – Getting to Know You

- What is your name? What name do you prefer to “go” by?
- What ONE word best describes you?
- How often do you understand the content you are learning at school?
 - Almost never
 - Once in a while
 - Sometimes
 - Frequently
 - Almost all the time
- How motivating are the lessons your teachers teach?
 - Not at all motivating
 - Slightly motivating
 - Somewhat motivating
 - Quite motivating
 - Extremely motivating
- How often do you engage in educational activities outside the home? (Tutoring, Library, Educational Camps)
 - Almost never
 - Once in a while
 - Sometimes
 - Frequently
 - Almost all the time
- How regularly do you read for fun? (not school related)
 - Almost never
 - Once in a while
 - Sometimes
 - Frequently

- Almost all the time
- How well have the teaching methods of your teachers matched your own learning style?
 - Not well at all
 - Mildly well
 - Fairly well
 - Quite well
 - Extremely well
- How much effort do you put into school-related tasks?
 - Almost no effort
 - A little bit of effort
 - Some effort
 - Quite a bit of effort
 - A tremendous amount of effort
- Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

Appendix C: Excerpt Participant Quotes

Question: What motivates you to learn new things?

Participant 1: *Let me think about it for a second. Well I know that if I learn new things I will do well in life and get to go to college and hopefully get a good job one day and not end up like on the streets and all that stuff so that's what motivates me. Just doing I mean a good and going to a good college eventually.*

Participant 2: *The experiences that it could bring like the outcome at the end that I could learn new things.*

Participant 3: *I like learning stuff. Also it helps me get through life. So it can help me in many ways for the future.*

Participant 4: *It's going to pay off when I am older.*

Participant 5: *I feel like I need to know things for the future if I want to get to a good college or yea a good college. So I feel that I need to learn as much as I can now so I can know for the future.*

Participant 6: *If it seems interesting and it might better me later in life.*

Participant 7: *The knowledge of knowing new things.*

Participant 8: *What motivates me to learn new things is mostly my mom and dad how they're always pushing me to learn new things and I don't want to let them down so I just learn new things for them.*

Participant 9: *It has to be interesting. If it's fun.*

Participant 10: *Well I've always been motivated to keep learning because the more knowledge I have I'll be able to be more successful in life. Because my success I feel will be the result of the things I have learned, I have accomplished.*